

THE CLOTHES DO MAKE THE WOMAN: THE POLITICS OF FASHIONING  
FEMININITY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CHICK LIT

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of KATIE O'DONNELL AROSTEGUY find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Abstract

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Chair: Joan Burbick

Chick Lit as a genre is often dismissed by literary and cultural critics for its seemingly formulaic plotlines, obsession with consumer culture, and its inability to engage contemporary issues of gender, race, and class. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young's 2006 collection of critical essays entitled *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, however, put Chick Lit on the critical radar as a legitimate area of study for interested scholars. Following in these footsteps, I argue in this dissertation that the Chick Lit genre proves to be fertile ground for examining tensions in contemporary gender relations and the anxiety women feel about navigating dominant ideologies of white femininity.

I focus on how several different American Chick Lit texts question the norms that create and maintain popular standards tied to privileged white femininity. My main contention is that while the books—by their close—do in fact rehearse hegemonic cultural norms that enforce conformity with dominant white culture, heroines exhibit moments of hesitation and resistance that reveal just how strict the limits are and just how dangerous conformity may be. These moments of resistance, I argue, reveal a strong desire to resist. This unresolved, resistant desire simmers at the surface of every text and leaves the reader questioning the superficial ending meant to satisfy the everyday reader. While heroines masquerade as having choices and leading “empowered” lives, misadventures at work and personal lives

reveal performances of gender restricted to the heteronormative matrix that controls cultural norms. By employing Butlerian theories, as well as cultural theory from whiteness, masculinity, and contemporary Chicana theorists, I argue that the postfeminist fantasy the books project via marketing tactics is entirely misleading for books that, in actuality, provoke a discussion about the dangers of conforming to mainstream norms that govern beauty culture, gender relations, motherhood, and racial stereotyping. Chick Lit, far from celebrating the choices and freedom women supposedly have, points instead to the dangers associated with adopting such a slanted worldview.

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**Dedication**

For

Carsen James--

*May you twinkle, twinkle little star*

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Locating Chick Lit in Popular and Literary Culture

When in 1994 Cris Mazza was asked to run a book contest aimed at discovering unacknowledged and/or unappreciated contemporary women writers, she admits having no idea what she meant by including the catchy term “postfeminist” on the flier. Neither did she know that the authors and stories she picked as winners from this contest would come to form the cornerstone text of what is now commonly referred to as contemporary Chick Lit. In the introduction to her first collection of Chick Lit stories entitled *Chick-Lit: On the Edge: New Women's Fiction Anthology*, she confesses:

I just thought ‘postfeminist’ was a funky word—possibly a controversial one if read *anti*-feminist—so I didn’t define it. I probably couldn’t have if I wanted to. It was almost a joke, an ice-breaker . . . I was looking for something different, something that stretched the boundaries of what has been considered ‘women’s writing.’ (“Editing Postfeminist Fiction” 104)

Unaware of what effects connecting the two terms Chick Lit and postfeminist writing might have, Mazza’s original intention was simply to give voice to women writers who hadn’t been heard yet, and it wasn’t until she later combed through all 400 of the submitted manuscripts that she crafted the answer to her own original question: What is postfeminist fiction? Her answer:

Not anti-feminist at all, but also not/ My body, myself/ My lover left me and I am so sad/ ALL MY PROBLEMS ARE CAUSED BY MEN/ ...BUT WATCH ME ROAR/ Society has given me an eating disorder/ a poor self esteem/ a victim’s

perpetual fear/ therefore I'm not responsible for my [stupid] actions. (Mazza, "Chick-Lit: On the Edge" 8)

A common theme among the manuscripts that answered the call for stories, according to Mazza, was an interest in “stories about divorce, incest, rape, sexual harassment, general sexism, man-hating, mother-bashing, woe-is-me I'm-a-victim-of-an-unfair-world fiction” (109). Determined to give voice to authors and heroines who see themselves and women as “*more* than oppressed victims . . . [who] can *start* things instead of just react”—women who see themselves as responsible for what they face in their lives--Mazza hoped to circumvent the primary way she claims women gain any significance in American society—“[by] how many times, and how hideously, [they have] been a victim” (111).

The idea that women achieve empowerment by making choices—that they can act as sexual agents instead of succumbing to victim status, that they “consciously see[k] pleasure rather than us[e] their bodies as tokens of exchange with men”—has become the key ingredient in a Chick Lit narrative. This has, in the process, angered many literary and feminist critics who see the genre as incapable of offering any social or cultural critique because of the focus on the individual (Ferriss and Young, “Chicks, Girls and Choice” 89). This position rests on the faulty assumption that because the books are marketed as postfeminist, they are necessarily anti-feminist in nature. Those who side with this viewpoint argue that the focus on the individual cripples and depoliticizes feminist concerns to such an extent that there exists no possibility for social critique or subversion. This dissertation seeks to identify for the reader strategies the authors and characters use to resist and/or negotiate dominant ideologies of white femininity as they are developed in the genre. Even though the narratives overall offer superficial resolutions that serve to assuage readers' anxieties about the difficulties of achieving fulfillment via

traditional routes of ascribing to mainstream definitions of white beauty, marriage, and motherhood, characters and situations often exhibit the very real tensions, insecurities, and frustrations readers feel with meeting gendered expectations in contemporary American life. These tensions fracture the idea that such an achievement is possible.

The texts appeal to readers' *desire* to resist conforming to unreasonable expectations tied to privileged white professional women and communicate ways that women might resist such conformity. This voice of resistance--however humorous or seemingly insignificant--and these moments of asserting agency and questioning the power of mainstream society to define roles for us, lead me to see value in examining Chick Lit texts for how they attempt to address contemporary understandings of gender and race. The books reveal tensions regarding how restrictive societal norms contain and maintain gendered, racial, and class identity; these moments of tension offer the greatest insight into how the heroines and authors negotiate the complexity of these norms. However, the rhetoric of choice and individualism that plagues postfeminism and informs strategies of resistance in Chick Lit often proves to be problematic in terms of adequately addressing social realities affected by race and class tensions. Unfortunately, the kind of agency the genre promotes is, in the long run, detrimental to really making necessary structural changes in women's professional and personal lives.

The emergence of Chick Lit—a genre loosely defined as “consist[ing] of heroine-centered narratives that focus on the trials and tribulations of their individual protagonists” and, more specifically, as “single women in their twenties and thirties ‘navigating their generation’s challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships’”—has spurred heated discussions among contemporary literary critics, feminists, and women writers (Smith 2; Ferriss and Young, Chick Lit 3). While the term Chick Lit was rather accidentally coined by Cris

Mazza's anthology *Chick-Lit: On the Edge: New Women's Fiction Anthology* in 1995, and is "invariably traced back" by most readers and critics to a single seminal text—Helen Fielding's 1996 runaway bestseller *Bridget Jones's Diary*—some scholars trace themes and methods of characterization to very different literary ancestors (Ferriss and Young, Chick Lit 4). Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Edith Wharton's novels that chronicle the lives of the New York elite class are often cited as literary forerunners to the popular genre. Fielding has admitted to borrowing material from Austen on countless occasions in order to shape Bridget's character, but the overall "literary" quality of Chick Lit, as critics such as Juliette Wells and countless others remind us, pales in comparison to Austen's oeuvre. While *Bridget Jones Diary* may borrow literary conventions and themes from Austen, the Chick Lit genre is an independent, contemporary movement marked by characteristics that clearly diverge from Austen, as well as popular books about sex and shopping from the 1960s and romance novels from the 1970s. The key difference between Chick Lit and traditional romance fiction is the latter's focus on the heroine's involvement with "one, and only one, man" (Ferriss and Young, Chick Lit 3). Instead, As Stephanie Harzewski points out, "chick lit jettisons the heterosexual hero to offer a more realistic portrait of single life, dating, and the dissolution of romantic ideals" (qtd. in Ferriss and Young, Chick Lit 3). Unlike the readers of romance, who Janice Radway points out in her study *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture* are interested in reading narratives of heterosexual success to address the lack of such success in their own lives and to reassure themselves that such a quest is possible, Chick Lit readers admire their heroine's fallibility and misadventures seeking heterosexual love and happiness. We will see, however, some commonalities in terms of how Chick Lit, like Romance, proposes superficial endings that maintain dominant ideologies of gender, race, and class that serve to subdue and pacify readers.

Another distinctive quality of Chick Lit is its narrative focus on realism. Unlike the romance, which is clearly from the start make-believe, the Chick Lit genre expects the reader to identify so closely with the heroine's human flaws and desires that the text becomes almost her own diary, her own life. In this manner, Chick Lit effectively appeals to anxieties felt by many different women. As Chick Lit author Jennifer Weiner explains, earlier versions of sex and shopping—like Jackie Collins, Judith Krantz, and Helen Gurley Brown's 1962 *Sex and the Single Girl*—were about “glitz and glamour, [they had] heroines who were fun to read about, but just felt nothing like where you were in your life” (qtd. in Ferriss and Young, *Chick Lit* 4). In contrast, Chick Lit is supposed to portray realistic versions of the lives professional urban (or suburban as newer books reveal) women lead (or fantasize about living), complete with the ups and downs, the failures and possibilities of living in contemporary middle class American society. As Imelda Whelehan outlines in her book *The Feminist Bestseller*, one of the chief reasons women buy Chick Lit and enthusiastically consume the genre (both in its print and online form as evidenced by the popularity of websites, such as [chicklitbooks.com](http://chicklitbooks.com), [chick-lit.us](http://chick-lit.us), and [chicklit.co.uk](http://chicklit.co.uk), as well as many blogs maintained by the authors themselves) is because of what she terms the “identity crisis” for late-twenty and thirty-something working women. She quotes author Helen Fielding, who asserts: ““single women today, sort of in their thirties, are perhaps a new type of woman that hasn't got an identity. And that's all very worrying. Women have said to me: it [*Bridget Jones's Diary*] makes us feel that we're part of a club and we're not the only ones that feel stupid”” (187). Whelehan elucidates what this means: “the idea that reading the novel will make these women feel part of a community suggests a longing for an inclusive female sphere of experience—this longing seems to be what chick lit can speak to in quite specific ways” (188). Chick Lit aims to appeal to women across race and class lines who

live lives fragmented by 21<sup>st</sup>-century realities; books are marketed to appeal to universal issues that *affect, interest,* or serve as a *source of fantasy* for many women—work, relationships, sex, and, of course, consumption.

Chick Lit also attempts to appeal to the anxieties arguably felt by women occupying different strata of American society—including fears and worries surrounding returning to work following the birth of a baby and the resulting difficulties of maintaining some semblance of individual identity amid the demands of motherhood. To this end, Chick Lit nearly always employs first-person narratives that inspire a heroine's voice to be both spontaneous and candid, fresh and seductive. The voice attracts women because it promises not to tell anyone that the reader has some of the same fears and concerns, and has made some of the same blunders regarding the daily pressures of life experienced in both the work world and at home. Most Chick Lit employs an updated version of the epistolary form of 18<sup>th</sup> century texts—using diary entries, blog posts, email messages, online shopping, and chat room dialogues as primary methods of communication with society. These communication methods serve to entice 21<sup>st</sup> – century tech-savvy readers into the private, yet familiar, realm of these women's thoughts. The literary technique of humor usually accompanies these candid diary-like narratives to mitigate the seriousness of the situations and encourage readers to find humor in their own failings and/or use humor as a means of coping with personal and professional demands.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, a chief characteristic of Chick Lit is its ability to adapt to the needs and interests of diverse audiences and expand into alternative markets in the U.S. and abroad. As a genre born out of the journalism and publishing industries, it, like media, is defined by its very ability to adapt to and morph into different forms as per public response and need. The women who now write Chick Lit are a very diverse group. Although it began as a



literary and cultural movement dominated by white, upper-middle class women often employed in the mass media field, Chick Lit has grown and branched out to include the voices of others. Sistah Lit and Chica Lit have evolved to speak to black and Latina audiences, respectively. Christian Lit has grown out of a response to the large Christian following. Mommy Lit voices the concerns of women struggling with motherhood in its many stages. Bigger Girl Lit is aimed at targeting the demographic of women struggling with weight issues. Bride Lit is devoted to women encountering pressures regarding engagement and marriage. Nanny Lit addresses the lives of nannies and the demanding (and sometimes cruel) women they work for. Hen Lit appeals to a demographic of older women who identify personal and professional struggles that differ markedly from those their 20- and 30-something daughters face. Chick lit is also being adopted by women writers in India and post-communist Eastern European countries to reflect new feminist understandings of changing women's realities.<sup>1</sup> The Chick Lit industry has essentially evolved alongside the world of Internet culture, increasing the potential for interconnectedness between women in different countries as well as within the U.S. to engage Chick Lit topics and concerns as authors infiltrate blog spaces, websites, and MySpace pages to discuss everything from raising children and dating to methods of advancing careers.<sup>2</sup>

Chick Lit is much broader than a genre that merely discusses sex, shopping, and romance. While consumerism is a popular feature of these novels in the many forms it takes—women consume anything from shoes and brand name clothes to hair designs, styles of pregnancy, and men—the way consumerism factors into women's lives is more than a desire to

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<sup>1</sup> See Rachel Donadio's article "The Chick-Lit Pandemic."

<sup>2</sup> Caroline J. Smith discusses in detail how author Sherrie Krantz invented a character, Vivian, who became the star of both *The Autobiography of Vivian: A Novel* and her own website: [vivianlives.com](http://vivianlives.com). Krantz' website allows viewers to track her daily activities and engage with her as if she is an actual person. Krantz's creation is evidence of the connection Chick Lit has with the Internet culture and the possibilities this holds for ways readers, viewers, and consumers can tap into various aspects of the Chick Lit market.

acquire things to glamorize one's life. Chick heroines consume for more complicated reasons; they consume in an effort to fashion their identities and negotiate the disparate expectations surrounding women with the potential access to education and professional opportunities. A critical eye to what they're consuming, how they consume, and why, opens up discussion of the very performative nature of dominant white femininity and the unreasonable expectations thrust upon women to conform. Furthermore, as the mainstream, somewhat formulaic Chick Lit narrative moves into these different subgenres and begins to reflect different realities, it increasingly has the potential to reveal insightful voices and moments of resistance.<sup>3</sup>

#### The Academy's Resistance to Chick Lit

The contention that Chick Lit is worthy of serious critical consideration occupies a tenuous position within both the literary and feminist cultural studies fields partly because Chick Lit is a relatively new literature and partly because it locates itself in the popular and subscribes to postfeminist rhetoric. Popular women's writing has a long history of being denigrated and/or ignored, especially in regard to inclusion in the canon of American literature—a cultural phenomenon that has long privileged subjectivities specific to male experience and branded these as authentically 'American.' Stories about women's experiences and concerns, however, have incurred charges of not only non-literary (they are inherently non-universal because they are about women), but also 'un-American' (Fetterley 17). As feminist historian Toril Moi outlines in her book *Sexual/Textual Politics*, feminist literary criticism has expanded in many different directions since its inception in the 1970s. Critics have analyzed the complex representations of

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<sup>3</sup> See especially Chapter Five of this dissertation, which discusses how the Chica Lit subgenre opens up provocative discussions of race and class, allowing for more serious critiques of dominant American ideologies surrounding

women in both men's and women's texts as well as the political aims of women authors in order to illuminate feminist agendas previously overlooked by traditional literary criticism. Many contemporary feminist literary critics are also engaged in the task, now very popular in the academy, of recovering women's texts that have long been ignored—oftentimes because of their location in the realm of the popular. Much serious consideration has been given to the feminist implications of contemporary women's sci-fi writing, 19<sup>th</sup> century women's regionalism and local color writings, as well as traditional romance novels of the 1970s and 80s.

The ethnographic work of Janice Radway's 1984 *Reading the Romance* examines the function of women's romance novels for women in a Midwestern town and argues that the act of reading is indeed an empowering act of escapism for women whose lives revolve around the caretaking of others. According to Radway, the women's attraction to the genre is fueled by the desire to find traditional heterosexual relationships positive and satisfying since many experience dissatisfaction in this regard in their own daily lives. Once denounced as popular, trashy, and formulaic, romance novels have proven to be fertile ground for the examination of anxieties surrounding gender relations in the 1970s. Women's Sci-Fi has also received ample attention from literary feminist critics, abounding as it does with visions of feminist utopias and metaphors galore of endangered and collapsing gender relations within society. Genres of women's writing are catching scholars' interests today and provoking thoughtful discussions about feminism. But not Chick Lit. Why? This dissertation attempts to "recover" the still very popular genre of Chick Lit that has not been given adequate scholarly attention. Critics have by and large failed to recognize the potential this popular women's writing has to illuminate anxieties surrounding many aspects of women's lives, including the intense pressure to conform to the styles of mainstream white femininity presented in the texts. Studying Chick Lit narratives also gives us

the opportunity to open up discussion about the dangers of reproducing and normalizing such narratives of white femininity and the limits the narratives set for defining acceptable expressions of gender.

Many feminist literary critics rail against the genre for its seeming formulaic and homogenous plotlines, simplistic and unserious subject matter, and altogether absence of the characteristics academics use to judge literary merit. Likewise, Chick Lit has also been ignored by feminist cultural critics who claim the genre not only reserves a safe space for the expression of traditional gender roles, but also fails to engage contemporary discussions of socio-economics, race, and gender (Gill 493-4). More often than not, the genre is dismissed outright by literary and/or feminist critics because it is mistakenly viewed as narratives of women simply going about their lives, shopping, and blindly seeking out Mr. Right. The academy's resistance to Chick Lit is perhaps best summarized by British novelist Beryl Bainbridge's oft-quoted lamentation in 2001: "It is a pity they [readers] can't read something a bit deeper, a bit more profound, something with a bit of bite to it" (qtd. in Smith 3). Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, both in their collection of critical essays on Chick Lit entitled *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* and in an article on generational conflict over understandings of Chick Lit entitled "A Generational Divide Over Chick Lit," discuss how many emerging scholars and graduate students have been dissuaded from pursuing scholarly work on Chick Lit by senior professors who fear their work will not be taken seriously in the academy.<sup>4</sup> In many scathing reviews of Chick Lit that liken the entire genre to "beach reads," "fluff" or, better yet, "beach trash," we see critics and scholars who otherwise call themselves feminists denounce a genre of popular women's writing because it seems to rehearse a traditional, conservative approach to

gender and race relations.<sup>5</sup> Such critics partake in the decades-long argument at the forefront of issues concerning women's writing: what classifies a text as *feminist*? Whose women's writing should be read? And why? The reluctance on feminist critics' parts to engage Chick Lit is really a reluctance to accept the popular in the coveted field of women's "literature." This dissertation enters into this conversation as it seeks to give reasons why Chick Lit should be read and critically considered.

As Caroline J. Smith argues in *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit*, the first full-length study of the genre by one writer, women's writing through time has often engaged with consumerism and delved into the realm of the popular—think domestic advice manuals, women's magazines, self-help books, etc. When critics denounce Chick Lit, they ignore not only a genre but an entire industry largely founded, funded, and inspired by women. It would be negligence on our part, as critics, to ignore a genre that not only reflects, but arguably engages and critiques--via strategies that highlight heroines' reluctance and anxieties about conforming to dominant ideologies of femininity--contemporary American gender politics. Furthermore, in their reluctance to study Chick Lit, critics reveal an underlying assumption that some areas of the popular do not criticize or question dominant ideologies. While pop culture studies is a well-established field—evidenced by a huge yearly conference that engages topics from comic books, to the Western film, to video games—Chick Lit, as a genre of the popular, has failed to garner consideration from contemporary literary and cultural feminist thinkers.

The common understanding of the Chick Lit genre, as perceived through academics'

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<sup>4</sup> When I contacted Ferriss and Young regarding this point, they were able to furnish me with a lengthy list of graduate students and junior faculty who could speak of their experiences being dissuaded from conducting scholarly work on Chick Lit.

<sup>5</sup> The term "beach trash" was used by *New York Times* reviewer Chaire Sicha in his review of Plum Sykes's *Bergdorf Blondes*. Likewise, writer Curtis Sittenfeld, included in Merrick's anthology, posed the question: "Doesn't the term [Chick Lit] basically bring down all of us?" in her review of Sophie Kinsella's *The Wonder Spot*.

eyes, goes something like this: Mass-marketed paperbacks featuring martini glasses and high-heeled designer shoes that entice buyers to read about a middle-upper class white woman's search for a mainstream, rich, white, successful man. Such a quest requires acquiring many fashionable consumer goods and concludes with the message that this embodies women's experience. This understanding of the Chick genre continues to be passed down through literary reviews, opinion pieces, author interviews, and publishers who discuss marketing strategies and intentions. In short, it's no surprise that this is what people think Chick Lit is. Everywhere we look, this is how it is defined. What this dissertation aims to do is read between the lines and to some extent ignore what the critics, publishers, marketers, and even authors say about their own work. Similar to how critics now assert feminist readings and interpretations of romance novels—that, in Harzewski's words, "offer an archetypal, fixed image of the exchange between men and women" at a time of shifting understandings of gender relations—this dissertation discovers ways in which Chick Lit reveals complex worries, frustrations, and anticipations about 21<sup>st</sup> century understandings of gender (Harzewski, "Tradition" 37).

Literary and feminist cultural critics aren't the only ones knocking Chick Lit. The genre's saturation of the publishing market has angered other contemporary women novelists who deride Chick Lit for claiming to be the "voice" of women's concerns today. When, in 2006, Elizabeth Merrick published an anthology with big, bold, pink letters declaring *This is Not Chick Lit: Original Stories by America's Best Women Writers*—a collection that includes contemporary American women writers who refuse the label of Chick Lit author—she sparked a fight among contemporary American women novelists by declaring that Chick Lit was flooding the market and preventing other legitimate—i.e., the "most gifted"—women from being read (ix). In her introduction she likens Chick Lit to "other celebrity rags like *Us Weekly*" that she reads while on

the treadmill; likewise, she distinguishes Chick Lit—something that “shuts down our consciousness”—from literature—that which “expands our imagination” (ix). Interestingly, women writers, as well as scholars, are engaged (more so than men it seems) in the arduous task of deriding Chick Lit. The label of Chick Lit infuriates many women writers because it has become synonymous with anti-feminist, “unserious” writing. In response to Merrick’s collection, Lauren Baratz-Logsted quickly gathered together seventeen women proud to call themselves Chick Lit authors and published *This is Chick-Lit*, complete with a high-heeled red shoe to adorn the cover. The struggle to control what counts as “women’s writing” continues as critics remain reluctant to elevate writing that runs the risk of being interpreted as distinctly female, trivial, or unabashedly frivolous, to the domain of “literature”. Similar debates over what can qualify as “men’s writing” are nowhere to be found. While attacks from both the outside by critics and the inside by women writers continue to be launched on Chick Lit, its growth is unprecedented as it continues to morph into different subgenres, tap into different reader markets, and appeal to writers overseas as a legitimate writing form capable of exploring the complexities of women’s lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The very writing of the dissertation is an argument that Chick Lit is, indeed, literature. It contains a myriad of complexities of character and theme that provoke thoughtful consideration of cultural issues. The heightened concern over what qualifies to represent “women’s experience” or “women’s literature,” though perhaps born out of good intention (i.e., to elevate women’s literature out of the popular and into the literary) is, in itself, stifling and limiting. Chick Lit, even though it originated as wealthy white women’s fiction and continues in this vein to some extent today, reveals telling anxieties that suggest just how fragile and artificial the pressures to conform to dominant ideologies of white femininity are.

## Marketing for Quick Consumption

The tendency to oversimplify and/or denigrate Chick Lit is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the evolution of the Chick Lit industry itself. Women—as the writers, editors, publishers, and marketers of the genre—are fully in control of the fate of this genre; yet, Chick Lit books continue to be marketed and sold as fluff reads. Why? Chick Lit is purposely marketed for quick consumption. Girly, flirty colorful covers depicting women’s body parts, martini glasses, shoes, or handbags entice potential customers to read about heroines struggling with shoe, food, Botox, and sex addictions. The kind of light praise given on the back of the books reinforces such a simplistic and playful view of Chick Lit. The back cover of Beth Harbison’s *Shoe Addicts Anonymous* reads: “Reading this novel is like eating a slice of cake;” “Enough heart (and sole) for beach readers and foot fetishists alike;” and “More fun than a pair of Manolos, more exciting than some Prada platforms.” Such praise engages an audience looking for a light read about women who just can’t get enough; it does this by playing off the degrading criticism many of the authors, elsewhere in their writing, deplore. Chick Lit is often dismissed as a genre marked by silly stories about women obsessed with shopping and consumption. Interestingly, women are ultimately the ones responsible for constructing, manufacturing, and selling the genre in this manner—usually in an effort to sell the books and make money. The books appeal to a consumer-driven society that determines one’s worth by how many, and what kind, of things they consume. Packaged to encourage the same kind of consumption glorified on the covers, the novels themselves come in different flavors and styles. Similar to the paradoxical role the media plays in the books, success of the genre in terms of sales is dependent upon selling the image of the “fluff read.” Media is at once the reason for the genre’s, and the authors’,



success even as it detracts from the genre's ability to be taken seriously.

Online communities of Chick Lit readers publish and maintain websites and blogs devoted to discussing issues raised by Chick texts. These more serious, or at least more in-depth, treatments often require membership and are clearly places ardent Chick Lit fans frequently visit to catch up on the latest Chick Lit releases, reviews, and author insights. Chick Lit sites like [chicklitchicks.com](http://chicklitchicks.com), [chicklitbooks.com](http://chicklitbooks.com), [chicklithub.com](http://chicklithub.com), etc. provide access to dozens of blogspots for readers interested in the women's issues brought up in Chick Lit novels. In spaces like these, many authors admit to disliking the covers publishing agents choose for their books; they fear such marketing will pigeonhole their book too firmly in the Chick genre. Yet many concede to the publisher's wishes in order to ensure successful sales. So much of the Chick Lit genre is bound up in a web complicated by desires to make money and achieve fame as a writer that it is hard to draw the line between what is true of the genre and what is being made up just to sell the books.

Marketed and sold primarily in trendy large corporate book retailers like Borders, where the consumption of books is accomplished by selling the lifestyle of the "intellectual," the genre is often given its own display stands—increasing the likelihood that the book jackets will become important selling points. Chick Lit books are packaged and marketed to appeal to the woman browsing such large corporate book retailers shopping for a reading style, if you will. In this way, the genre is presented as a stylish reading venture, rather than serious literature. As Ballistar et al. have argued, marketing contemporary women's fiction in this way triggers sales by appealing to "aspirational" audiences—women who maybe aren't as well off as the women depicted in the book who find something desirous or satisfying in reading about these heroines either because they feel the push to conform to such representations of white femininity or

because they know they will never embody that role and would like to live vicariously through the heroine. Stores like Borders in many ways sell the lifestyle (or fantasy?) of a “reader”; the ample displays of popular books mixed with the coffeehouse atmosphere invite the connection of reading with social and pop culture activities. In smaller, more eclectic and less commercial bookstores, Chick Lit is either nonexistent or sparsely placed in among the fiction shelves so that it blends in with other books.<sup>6</sup> These bookstores rely more on sincere interest in finding books on specific topics. Marketing is both Chick’s Lit’s strength and its pitfall. By selling books in this way, women’s monetary success in the publishing industry is guaranteed at the risk of the books being interpreted as “froth” and “beach reads.” The most dangerous consequence of this marketing is how it popularizes narratives that seem to praise and normalize dominant styles of white femininity. The displays communicate the books as popular, hip, and in style—the thing to consume.

### Chick Lit’s Culture of Feminism

Paula Kamen explains the popular, contemporary understanding of feminism as follows: “Without a sense of history and without personal exposure to feminism’s initial momentum, *the stereotypes are all we know*” (7). Chick Lit authors and fans tend to respond to what they’ve *inherited* as the common understandings of feminism as they have been represented in the media and distributed by people generally outside of the political movements. This is the knowledge, the reality, that informs Chick thought and it is important to consider as we go through these chapters and analyze the ways in which these heroines and authors conceptualize resistance. Chick Lit authors, readers, and heroines are barraged by media that encourages them to learn to

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<sup>6</sup> Such was my experience at Powell’s Books in Portland and City Lights in San Francisco.

“balance” and “juggle” the different demands in their lives so that they can succeed at work and at home. Many young women who fit the demographic Chick Lit appeals to understand greater access to the professions to be an opportunity afforded by second wave feminism; feminism, for these women, promises them the ability to achieve a life that is fulfilling personally and professionally. Yet, Chick Lit is distinguished by heroines who exhibit anxieties about their ability to accomplish such a feat. Deborah Siegel poignantly summarizes the situation when she asks:

How do younger women reconcile the gap between the tremendous opportunities they've been given and the inequalities that persist? How do they continue the fight for equality when they are constantly told—by the media, by each other, and often by their leaders—how good they already have it? (8)

While the covers of these books, and the way in which they are marketed, suggests that women have achieved success in regard to holding careers such that their focus can now be trivial things such as drinks and fashion, the content of these books reveals something far different. Nearly every Chick Lit novel presents a heroine wrestling with this concept of the “balancing act,” but she often finds herself in the losing spot. Authors and heroines question what is really possible for the twenty-something or thirty-something woman with access to education and desires for personal and professional fulfillment. In showing the depths they will go to to achieve mainstream white femininity and the shallowness and unnaturalness of such a quest, the authors question the viability of a project that seeks to normalize fantasies of white femininity. The narratives show that despite these professional opportunities, women are stuck obsessing over superficial concerns of beauty and fashion—revealing the stranglehold mainstream culture has on them.

As Deborah Siegel's work in *Sisterhood Interrupted: From Radical Women to Grrls Gone Wild* shows, feminists have always been apprehensive at best about the role media should play in feminism's cause—often distrusting the media outright for generating and circulating inaccurate and unachievable images of women. As Sarah Gamble argues, postfeminism, a concept she terms “a media-orchestrated misunderstanding” of second wave thought, originated through 1980s media sources and convinced young women that “a joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement” is desperately needed in order to understand and communicate concerns of their present situation (49 and 44). Kamen describes the “feminist stigma” young women today have of older second wavers as “the twisted, all-too-common logic” that “If you stand up for women, you must hate men. Therefore, you must be angry. Thus, you must be ugly and can't get a man anyway. Hence, you must be a dyke” (Kamen, *Feminist Fatale* 7). Susan Faludi's seminal work *Backlash* corroborates this idea with the argument that once women were gaining ground in the mid-1980s, they were bombarded with media that told them feminism was dead. Indeed, as Gamble points out, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines postfeminism as: “of or relating to the ideas, attitudes, etc., which ignore or reject feminist ideas of the 1960s and subsequent decades” (Gamble 44). Largely a media-driven phenomenon that has (problematically) become synonymous with anti-feminism, postfeminism, though it “lacks both an agreed-upon set of ideological assumptions and any prominent figureheads,” has become associated with such “personalities” as Naomi Wolf, Camille Paglia, Rene Denefeld, and Katie Roiphe (Gamble 37). Gamble rightly stresses that such “personalities” rarely claim the “postfeminist” label; rather, they usually have it thrust upon them by those who don't know what else to call them.

The movement--because it criticizes the notion of women as victims, expresses

skepticism regarding the condemnation of porn and date rape, and tends to endorse heterosexual relations--has received a bad reputation within academe. It is often considered “fundamentally conservative and reductive in its thought” and linked to such groups as The New Right, Moral Majority, and antichoice activism (Gamble 52). Third wave feminists are often quick to distinguish themselves from postfeminists on the grounds that their work is more closely linked to political activism; they usually acknowledge earlier feminist movements and choose ways to build on them rather than propose movement “beyond” them. Chick Lit has been easily dismissed because it has linked itself to postfeminism, thus marking itself as unserious and unengaged with contemporary feminist issues recognized by feminist cultural critics.

The feminism espoused by the authors and heroines of Chick Lit is more a culture than a cause. This culture of feminism sympathizes with finding value in individual choice and agency marked by decisions—however small—the heroines can exert control over. In *Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory*, author Suzanna Walters quotes Judith Stacey, a Sociology professor at New York University, whose definition of post-feminism goes as follows:

Postfeminism isn't anti-feminist, rather it entails an often unconscious internalization of certain basic feminist goals, with an accompanying depoliticization and individualization of them. Postfeminism is understood as a series of strategies to negotiate the treacherous waters of postindustrial society and its concomitant challenges to traditional family structures, themselves altered fundamentally by second-wave feminism. (qtd. in Walters 137)

Stacey argues that part of this depoliticization “often takes the form of the reduction of feminist *social* goals to individual lifestyles” (qtd. in Walters 137). Postfeminists have inherited a certain understanding of second wave feminism through the media and are attempting to reformulate

what it means to be feminist in 21<sup>st</sup> century society. For today's young feminists other feminisms, because they have become "conflated with victimology, sexual protectionism, humorlessness, and rules," have become the enemy (Siegel 101). Looking for new models of femininity and fresh ways to express the difficulties that have arisen with maintaining careers alongside single life, or families, many young women have embraced a new strand of feminism that, whether right or wrong, in good taste or not, understands the second wave in one or more of the following ways: as "man-hating" (as described by Natasha Walter in *The New Feminism*), as being "rigidly puritanical" in regards to sexual expression, or as producing women victims (as perceived by Naomi Wolf and Kate Roiphe) (Ferriss and Young, "Chicks, Girls, and Choice" 88). In short, heroines and authors of Chick Lit "argu[e] in favor of women's sexual freedom and pleasure as signs of independence and power" even as they draw attention to the limits and dangers such an approach to feminism holds ("Chicks, Girls, and Choice" 88).

Ferriss and Young point out in their article "Chicks, Girls, and Choice: Redefining Feminism" that "whether or not such charges against second-wave feminists are true or fair is largely beside the point. The real issue is the perception of the young women who are responding to it. And in their minds, the angry feminism of the second wave is a detriment" (88). Because women have arguably entered the workforce on men's terms and are still expected to be the caretakers of children, family, and other segments of the population, twenty- and thirty-something women seek ways to find and maintain feminine identities that they can exert control over.<sup>7</sup> "Freedom of reproductive choice or professional choice" has, in Ferriss and Young's words, "left too many other choices" and it is this multitude of choices available to women that produces the most anxiety (88).

## The Project

While Chick Lit parades as postfeminist in order to remain accessible and attractive to contemporary women who presume to follow such a feminist trend, the women of Chick Lit are hardly “beyond” the need for feminism or “anti” feminist in any way; rather, they attempt to engage feminism from a distinct vantage point that affords them some amount of agency even as it ultimately furthers the oppression of other women and complies with the overall patriarchal ideology that governs American society. In contrast to those who believe Chick Lit rejects or resists feminist ideology, I concur with Ferriss and Young, who purport that those women of the third wave “have not abandoned women’s concerns”; instead, they have “changed the strategies for highlighting and exploring them” (88). The main way that Chick Lit authors explore agency and resistance is through the rhetoric of choice. This rhetoric will always necessarily be flawed since only a select group of women have the ability to make such choices. Such acts of resistance are problematic at best, but serve to illuminate ways in which authors and heroines struggle to negotiate feminine agency and address cultural questions of race and class from within a patriarchal society.

Rather than use postfeminist theory to discuss the Chick Lit, I believe the genre can more effectively be opened up for analysis by employing a Butlerian lens that focuses on instances of performativity and the ways in which dominant ideologies surrounding white femininity are rehearsed, maintained, and questioned in the novels. The postfeminist identity, after all, is largely a performative one where women purchase and model their bodies and behaviors to conform to

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<sup>7</sup> See Ruth Rosen’s “Why Working Women are Stuck in the 1950s” and Suzzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young’s discussion of how Chick Lit authors seem to be “caught between competing demands to be strong and independent

certain dominant expressions of femininity. Butler is primarily interested in how the self presents itself as stable even while it is incessantly undergoing activities that shape (especially gendered) identity. Her goal, one that began in *Gender Trouble* and moved its way through her 2004 book *Undoing Gender*, is always to extend the definition of the human so that those who live outside heteronormative and racialized norms “need no longer suffer the violence of social exclusion” (Butler The Reader 3). The ultimate travesty for Butler is something she calls “social death,” meaning that if a person cannot live a life “politically”—a state she defines as able to “recognize one’s relation to others, one’s relation to power, and one’s responsibility to strive for a collective, more inclusive future,” one suffers social death (Butler, The Reader 12). If survival here means social acceptance of those who step outside the ideologically determined boundaries of race or gender, then Butler’s aim becomes one of “ruptur[ing]” the “existing norms” that bear on subjects and police gendered, raced, and classed identities. Butler allows me to really examine this concept of “choice” as represented in Chick Lit. At superficial glance, the books seem to profess choice as an inherent accessory to the postmodern American urban lifestyle. Butler puts “choice” into question by asserting that all “choices” are made within strict and limiting matrices of ideological power; it is the study of these “regulatory regimes” that provides the most insight into how society may begin to resist such forces. She argues: “If genders and sexes are ‘chosen’ in some sense, the choosing is always constrained by existing cultural norms” (Butler, The Reader 11). This dissertation aims to analyze these existing norms and to come to a conclusion about what they are and how they shape women’s performances of femininity in these novels. While heroines and authors profess choice, just how many choices do they really have and what does this reveal about the paradigm of agency the genre professes?

Butler has drawn attention to the idea that gender is always performed—that its very

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while retaining their femininity” (*Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction* 9).



meaning is produced through the performance. Her analysis of drag proves that “what we take to be ‘real,’ what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality” (Butler, Gender Trouble *xxiii*). If gender is produced through “the repeated stylization of the body,” an act that takes place within “a highly rigid regulatory frame,” it becomes possible to examine ways in which female bodies are stylized in different contexts and are controlled by different regulatory structures (Butler, Gender Trouble 44). Chick Lit draws attention to the ways in which female bodies are constructed and maintained. For Butler, “gender is always a doing,” and my analysis of how feminine identity is negotiated in Chick Lit texts will illuminate the idea that gender is not natural; rather, it is something we choose only within the realm of what is possible (Butler, Gender Trouble 33). Analyzing the construction of femininity in this way allows me to argue that Chick Lit has the capability to subvert and resist naturalized and fixed notions of gender *exactly because* it draws attention to the pointed and political ways culture mitigates expressions of mainstream femininity, masculinity, motherhood, and racial identity.

Just as masculinity scholars discuss the “contingent, fluid, socially and historically constructed” nature of masculinity, so too does Chick Lit emphasize “how femininity itself is a social fabrication, one that is inherently perverse and compelling, and framed by rituals of repetition” (Gardiner 11 and Radner 107). Chick Lit complicates the message mainstream media promises women about maintaining their beauty and feminine appeal by portraying the complexities women face as they attempt to negotiate the demanding realities of dating, motherhood, a career, and the allure of consumer culture to solve the problems of the modern woman. The texts stress how attaining and maintaining codes of white privileged femininity is necessary and expected, but it is anything but natural; rather, the process is performance based

and heavily reliant upon women's connection with and modification of consumer goods. Far from the happy ending most of the books seek to present, these realities provoke in the critical reader intense feelings of apprehension regarding the genre's overall aim to normalize a white feminine experience.

What most interests me is the unsettled feeling that sets in once I finish a Chick Lit book. You watch the gutsy heroine combat mainstream definitions of a successful mother throughout the book, only to find that woman conforming to the model mother image in the end. Why is this comforting to readers? What function does this serve? Even though the heroine tries to resist in different, albeit problematic, ways, the novels superficially resolve the tension and leave the reader clinging to the intense *desire to resist* that was present throughout the book. The novels appeal to readers' *desires to resist*—to stand up to the dominant ideologies attached to mothering or beauty or women's relationships with men—and alleviate, through their resolutions, worries about being able to conform. Through the rhetoric of choice and individualism, Chick Lit espouses that any woman can make the choices the heroine does. Readers undoubtedly leave the books feeling relieved. Such a life is possible! Such a man is possible! I can be that mother! The effect of this promising empowerment, however, is an inability to address the larger structural problems attached to achieving real empowerment.

In terms of placing my work within a frame of what has come before it, there have only been two long critical works on the Chick Lit genre published as of the time of this writing. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young's excellent 2006 collection of critical essays entitled *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* explores the diversity of the Chick Lit genre with several thought-provoking topics such as the literary history of the genre, its relation to 19<sup>th</sup> century novels of manners and women's texts, its foray into various subgenres such as Sistah Lit, Nanny Lit,

Mommy Lit, etc., and, lastly, the role of consumption and sexuality in Chick Lit. The other major study by Caroline Smith that has just come out, entitled *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit*, is the first full-length published study of the genre by one author. The book explores the hold popular culture mediums such as women's magazines, self help books, and romantic comedies have on Chick Lit authors and protagonists. Smith argues that heroines struggle with and ultimately free themselves of the feminine behaviors dictated to them by these texts. She suggests that Chick heroines are informed consumers whose fallibility and difficulty making decisions reflect the bombardment women today face from the media. In placing their protagonists in absurd predicaments that arise as a result of subscribing to traditional expectations of feminine culture, Smith argues that Chick Lit critiques consumer culture.

Both Ferriss and Young's collection and Smith's work concern themselves to a great degree with examining foundational Chick Lit texts—*Bridget Jones Diary*, the *Shopaholic* series, *Sex and the City*—as well as tracing and defining a literary history for the genre. My study will look beyond such cornerstone texts to more recent texts within the Chick Lit genre that span some of the sub-genres and reflect current expressions of 21<sup>st</sup> century American feminist thought. I am interested not in where Chick Lit has come from, per se, but more so in what it has become, where it is headed, and what this reveals about gender relations in American society. My intention is to illuminate instances of resistance within the texts where heroines question dominant ideologies surrounding white femininity, masculinity, motherhood, or racial identity. Although the narratives overwhelmingly end up folding back into complicity with dominant ideologies—a narrative device that I believe affords the reader a false sense of security and comfort—these moments of resistance are telling in that they reveal serious tensions women feel with conforming to mainstream representations of gender and race. Such trendy, pop culture

resolutions are attractive to the reader and lucrative for the author; it is the implications of such resolutions that one must examine more closely.

Text selection for the project has been carried out diligently with the following scholarly intentions: 1) Texts needed to be very current. I tried at all times to find American texts written in 2002 or later since a considerable amount has been written on earlier, more foundational texts, such as *Bridget Jones Diary*, *Sex and the City*, and Sophie Kinsella's *Shopaholic* series. 2) Since Chick Lit books are primarily marketed and sold through three major publishing imprints in the U.S., I attempted to find texts that would serve as a representative sample of the three major outlets. 3) I purposely tried to choose books with different geographical representations in the U.S.—either written by or about locations in the urban West as well as the more dominant East coast. 4) I purposely chose more popular books as listed and discussed on popular Chick Lit websites since these are the books women are actually reading. More detail will be given regarding the specifics of text selection for each individual chapter at the chapter's opening, since for most chapters I had to further classify and represent texts within subgenres after following my above parameters.

Each chapter of this dissertation analyzes a key aspect associated with dominant ideologies of mainstream white femininity and seeks to discover the expectations surrounding the dominant ideology—whether it be white beauty culture, dominant modes of masculinity, or ideal mother figures—and how heroines attempt to resist conformity to such popular representations of white femininity. These methods of resistance, though riddled with rhetoric of choice, illuminate tensions in the gendered landscape of postmodern American society. The last chapter delves into the subgenre of Chica Lit in an effort to show how these writers and heroines offer stronger critiques of mainstream white femininity. The works in Chapter Five provide a

unique opportunity to reflect back on how the mainstream white Chick Lit discussed in the earlier four chapters naturalizes whiteness. The chapter also raises questions about the drive, desire, and risks associated with performing “Latina-ness,” in addition to whiteness, to achieve success in the urban professional space.

For a genre that proposes to address “the stuff of life”—“friendship and laughter, love and death”—to come to dominate the American publishing market despite the voracious attempts by critics to belittle it as trash or declare its distinction from true “literature,” Chick Lit hearkens to be seriously considered (Baratz-Logsted 4). If Judith Butler is correct and the project of defining and understanding gender is constantly underway, and if we believe that representations and re-workings of women’s roles and anxieties in popular women’s literature can gain us valuable insight into contemporary feminist understandings of women—suggesting as they do both ideas for empowerment and limits in enacting actual structural change—then it is critical to analyze ways in which Chick Lit engages in redefining femininity. If feminism has always been a concept, an act, a way of life that groups have fought over the right to define, then Chick Lit is participating in the same conversation—the insatiable drive to understand women’s roles and choices and work toward ideas of women’s empowerment.

Chapter Two, entitled, “Creating the Contemporary Chick: Methods of Maintaining White Femininity,” begins the dissertation with a discussion of how mainstream Chick Lit constructs whiteness as tied to middle-class consumerist identity. The genre as a whole is devoted to furthering a certain image of the white professional woman--and attaching certain credentials, desires, and behaviors to her--and I look in Chapter Two at some of the specific ways novels do this. I use theories of whiteness developed by Toni Morrison to analyze how whiteness becomes attached to certain things, behaviors, and desires. It is important for me to lay

out a discussion of whiteness early on since the label “white” becomes subsumed by a certain class identity, as well as specific consumerist and professional ethos. Understanding how the novels superficially seek to naturalize and stabilize the image of a white, wealthy, professional woman endowed with ample choices is an integral component to later examining how exactly heroines attempt to step outside of these established norms.

The chapter reads Lynn Messina’s *Fashionistas* and Cathy Yardley’s *L.A. Woman* in an effort to discuss ways in which styles of white femininity are both manufactured and resisted. The culture of feminism espoused by Chick Lit is embedded in a language of choice and individualism as the heroines equate disciplining the body with asserting control. Their acts of resistance are problematic at the same time that they reveal the limitations of defining mainstream white femininity. I first look at how Messina’s text complicates theories of the “opt out” myth—a myth so popular in our national media that aims to normalize (especially white) women’s natural attraction to caretaking and aversion to working. I then draw on Butlerian theories to critique how mainstream white beauty culture in Yardley’s text is packaged in the language of choice and deviance to persuade our heroine to undergo a bodily makeover. Her participation both points to the unreasonable expectations forced on women to conform to popular understandings of beauty as well as the heroine’s overall inability to resist such powerful discourse to conform. When examined closely, the narrative reveals brief moments of doubt and confusion where the heroine reveals to her readers her true feelings toward conformity. Lastly, the chapter looks into what I propose may be the most effective method of resistance presented by these books—that of sexual exploration. The heroine usually negotiates a sexual identity by choosing from among available models presented to her by other female characters in the text. Oftentimes in Chick Lit, marriage is portrayed as stifling and unsatisfying, as is the single girl

life with its reliance *solely* on sexual encounters as acts of agency. Heroines in this analysis explore the different ways sexual agency can be attained that avoid either of these two traps; one heroine uses sex as a source of power and revenge while another subverts traditional sexual relationships by desiring friendship instead of sex.

Critics who have argued that Chick Lit reinstates traditional gender relations have failed to analyze the role men play in these books. Rosalind Gill, in her scathing declaration that Chick Lit “do[es] nothing to question normative heterosexual femininity,” compares Chick Lit to the popular romance of the 1970s and declares that this contemporary take on love reiterates the man as the savior figure—as the one who fulfills the women’s dreams (499). Chapter Three, titled “Thinking Beyond Prince Charming: Masculinity Fantasies in Chick Lit,” applies theories from contemporary masculinity theorists to read Gigi Grazer’s *Maneater*, Lisa Cach’s *Dating Without Novocain*, Cathy Yardley’s *L.A. Woman*, and Wendy Markham’s *Slightly Engaged* and open up discussions about how women’s fantasies of masculinity are changing and what this might mean. The authors challenge notions of the ‘Mr. Right’ figure critics often discuss as being essential to defining the urban career woman so often the subject of these novels. Chapter Three builds upon the sexual agency I discuss at the end of Chapter Two in that it extends the idea that Chick Lit authors are engaged in experimenting with different roles for men and women. The chapter discusses how dominant masculinity is established by the texts and then analyzes three key male figures that either conform to or resist the dominant style. While Chick Lit novels may seem to rehearse fairly traditional narratives of the woman choosing from among her suitors, the genre exposes how dominant masculinity—represented by the alpha male—is coming under attack and the ways in which it seeks to maintain power and the right to represent normative masculinity. In this way, Chick Lit engages in social critique and points to the social construction and

performative nature of dominant masculinity. Because masculinity is a historical, dynamic, and political process that seeks and ultimately persuades coercion from the masses, my interest lies in examining how alternative masculinities are policed in these texts and what this reveals about the unstable nature of dominant ideologies of masculinity. There is an evident tension surrounding how men are defined today—over what role they are supposed to play in the modern “empowered” woman’s life.

Chapter Four, entitled “The Politics of Performing Motherhood in Mommy Lit,” further extends this discussion of sexual agency by analyzing how Chick Lit complicates notions of motherhood. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theories of performativity to discuss the project of motherhood in the subgenre of Chick Lit called Mommy Lit, I examine Risa Green’s *Notes From the UnderBelly* and *Tales from the Crib*, Emily Giffin’s *Baby Proof*, Holly Chamberlin’s *Babyland* and Nelsie Spencer’s *The Playgroup* in an effort to open up discussion about how the heroines perform motherhood under certain societal constraints and the ways in which they defy contemporary dominant expectations surrounding motherhood. Even though the heroines conform to dominant ideologies surrounding motherhood by the end of the novel—which shows their inability to resist the power of dominant discourses—the heroine appeals to reader’s anxieties about motherhood by calling attention to the restrictive nature of such norms and the resulting performative nature of motherhood. This chapter explores how moms attain domestic products in an effort to achieve the behaviors and attitudes traditionally associated with “good mothering”—a mainstreamed style of motherhood that relies on the mother’s innately nurturing relationship with her child and connection to consumer culture. I am particularly interested in examining how Chick Lit authors work through contemporary understandings of traditional roles of mothers in an effort to provide a feminist account of mothering. I also discuss the



shortcomings evidenced by a subgenre that has given voice predominantly to white, middle class women's versions of motherhood. As such, the subgenre fails to give an accurate account of other women's lived experiences that equally affect contemporary understandings of motherhood and, hence, risks normalizing white affluent anxieties surrounding motherhood.

Chapter Five, “‘Not Latina Enough’: The Politics of Race and Class in Chica Lit,” closes this dissertation by examining two popular texts within the Chica Lit subgenre—Caridad Piñeiro's *Sex & The South Beach Chicas* and Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez' *The Dirty Girls Social Club*. I make the argument that Chica Lit has the potential to offer more effective models of resistance than mainstream white Chick Lit because it draws our attention to how issues of race and class complicate the negotiation of modern, urban femininity. I turn to an analysis of Chica Lit last because it allows me to reflect on how the postmodern concept of “choice,” as it is developed in the books discussed thus far in the dissertation, is determined by will. Chica Lit illustrates how this concept of “choice” is carefully tied to definitions of whiteness and success. The “choices” available to Chica Lit heroines, by contrast, are not “choices” at all; rather, heroines make difficult decisions largely determined by external forces of cultural and economic imperialism. Analyzing the decisions these heroines make elucidates the Butlerian concept that one can only perform gendered and raced identities as much as cultural norms allow. In detailing anxieties that result from having to perform various acts of “Latina-ness” and whiteness to attain success, Chica Lit forces readers to consider the effects of the strict cultural norms that seek to contain definitions of Latina identity. In response to this policing of Latina identity by mainstream America, Chica Lit seems to dissociate success from whiteness and re-package professional advancement as a specific act of ethnic agency so that the heroines are most successful and resourceful when they are able to rise out of economic despair and social

anonymity to positions of economic wealth and social prestige. Such a narrative mission risks essentializing the Latina as necessarily middle-class at the same time that it reveals an intense anxiety over what role Latinas should or need to play in contemporary society.

In this chapter, I use contemporary Chicana feminist theories in addition to Butler because Anzaldúa's concept of *mestiza consciousness*—where the bicultural subject embraces fragmentary and at times contested identities in an effort to reach an empowered state—grounds my discussion of how the heroine negotiates mainstream ideologies amid pulls of cultural and traditional values. Chela Sandoval also discusses feminist resistance that functions “within yet beyond” dominant ideologies, maneuvering change even as it “demand[s] alienation” from dominant society (“U.S. Third World Feminism” 3). I conduct a close analysis of how the text treats characters who attempt to venture outside of clearly defined roles for achieving success. In the end, it proves too difficult to escape the hegemonic forces imposed by the dominant class. Characters make attempts to appropriate, negotiate, and perform the language, goals, and behaviors of the oppressor and use it to their advantage. This can be interpreted in an Anzaldúan sense as tolerating contradictions and developing a “plural personality [where] nothing is thrown out” and in a Sandovalian sense as activating part of the “tactical weaponry” that allows one to move between and among different modes of resistance (Anzaldúa, Borderlands 101 and Sandoval, “U.S. Third World Feminism” 3). The *mestiza consciousness* creates the opportunity to achieve agency for women who inhabit in-between spaces where careful negotiation and manipulation of the intersectional realities and effects of race, class, culture, and gender is necessary. On the other hand, this appropriation of white values is dangerous because, in wanting to expand the definition and image of the Latina, the author distances her from working-class backgrounds.

Overall the treatment of Latina culture--especially in how the characters are ultimately unable to step outside of the norms--exposes the strict limits of acceptable gendered and racial identities and draws the reader into further contemplation about the potentially liberating act of rupturing the existing norms. Analyzing the role of the racial “other” in Chapter Five allows me to reflect more fully on the construction of white femininity as developed in the other mainstream texts, and it enables my discussion of methods of resistance to extend to a subgenre able to shed significant light on issues of race and class conflict in contemporary urban America.

Chick Lit is a popular genre with an amazing amount of potential to reach broad audiences. As Ferriss and Young attest to below, Chick Lit has a way of forming an intimate connection with its reader by revealing insecurities, fears, and hopes that many women can identify with:

The enormous popularity of chick lit and the films and television programs it has inspired, such as *Sex and the City*, attests to its resonance with a young female audience. Fans routinely stress their identification with the heroines of chick lit, suggesting that these texts are popular not because they are escapist ‘froth’ but because they tap into contemporary women’s struggles and fears. Readers gravitate, in particular, to the protagonists’ fallibility: these are not the flawless women of romance fiction waiting to be recognized by their ‘perfect’ man, but women who make mistakes at work, sometimes drink too much, and fail miserably in the kitchen. (Ferriss and Young, Chick Lit 93)

Many of the strategies authors and heroines propose for achieving feminine agency in contemporary American society are embedded in personal choice and range from speaking out against bosses, employing sexual agency to find satisfying relationships, and challenging popular understandings of masculinity, motherhood, and Latina identity. Looking at the subtle moments

of resistance where heroines exhibit reluctance or hesitation about conforming to expectations of mainstream beauty standards or definitions of success is an important part of analyzing Chick Lit.

Studying the dynamics present in Chick Lit allows us to see ways in which women struggle with negotiating mainstream norms and how they envision modes of resistance. Yet, Chick Lit runs the danger of speaking only to/about privileged women working in professional fields and ignoring the fact that such “choices” are not possible for all women living in a capitalist system that requires the exploitation of many to ensure the success of few. How heroines find empowerment becomes a key topic worthy of further investigation, revealing as it does complications associated with how factors of race and class affect identity formation and agency. So while the genre has potential to speak to and/or for many women, it is also limiting in its presentation of how some of these strategies can be employed. Discovering and working through these limitations, however, enables us to make conjectures about the power of popular narratives to enforce dominant ideologies and the danger this elicits.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**CREATING THE CONTEMPORARY CHICK: METHODS OF MAINTAINING  
WHITE FEMININITY**

For a genre that prides itself on detailing the trials and tribulations of seemingly empowered professional women in their everyday urban lives, readers will find it curious that most mainstream Chick Lit books do not overtly reflect racial or class tensions. While publishers and marketing strategies seem to seek out a reading demographic that cuts across race and class lines by relying on the belief that women enjoy watching fallible heroines navigate desires for things, beauty, and a better professional and personal life, the books themselves portray casts that are usually racially segregated—with more mainstream Chick Lit portraying primarily all-white casts and subgenres such as Chica Lit and Sistah Lit portraying all-Latina and all-black female casts respectively.<sup>8</sup> Books set in post-9/11 New York City rarely, if ever, mention the attacks on the World Trade Center towers or the racial tensions or political ramifications that have formed as a result. What is more, as Tracy reveals in Wendy Markham’s *Slightly Engaged*, thinking about politics is more a concerted effort, or choice, rather than a necessity: “I should be looking beyond my own little dilemma. I should be interested in other things. Global issues. Politics”

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<sup>8</sup> In the 2008 filmic adaptation of Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* that is an extension of the storyline from the hit HBO series (originally adapted from her column in *Atlantic Monthly* beginning in 1996), a black female character joins the all-white cast as Carrie’s personal assistant. Interestingly, Jennifer Hudson’s interests in fashion and love mimic those of the main characters; the only difference is that she doesn’t have as much money. Carrie discovers that she utilizes a service whereby she rents designer handbags—a process that allows her to appear like she owns the kinds of fashion accessories that Carrie and her friends sport. When Carrie gives her a Louis Vuitton handbag as a present, her assistant is thrilled, and we see a kind of normalization of the culture of affluent white feminism that we’ve seen throughout the series—a feminism that emphasizes choice and the acquiring of things to assert agency. Perhaps meant to address the endemic whiteness of the series, the addition of the black female character fails to provoke any discussion of race, class, or culture tensions; her character instead serves to shore up the whiteness of the series.

(213). The fact that these (usually) white middle-upper class heroines who dominate the texts can *afford* to be apolitical—they can choose to distance themselves from the realities of race and class tensions—points to how the texts as a genre safeguard monoracial terrain. This allows for characters to make choices regarding love and work that masquerade as methods of empowerment and ultimately lead to the traditional, happy, pop culture ending so seductive to readers.

In painting the all-white reality that so many Chick Lit texts do, authors create imaginary worlds where readers watch heroines negotiate work and family terrain on their own terms—unaffected by clashing outside social forces that, in real life, restrict the kinds of choices most women can indeed make on a daily basis. In effect, creating such a “safe space” that ignores systemic issues of race and class allows Chick Lit to normalize a white affluent professional female experience in the popular imaginary. While heroines usually end up conforming to dominant ideologies concerning behaviors and styles of mainstream white femininity, my task throughout this dissertation is to examine the points of resistance, or times where heroines seem to question myths surrounding mainstream white American femininity. I look here at what tensions are revealed by the heroine’s inability to step outside cultural norms of race and gender and ask the question: what can this tell us about the current climate of gender politics?

The narrative closure that Chick Lit books favor is one that promises readers they can make the right choices to empower themselves in whatever situation they’re in. This kind of closing works for the reader because it temporarily satisfies her and reassures her that she could make similar choices and achieve similar agency; it also works for the authors and publishing companies because it spurs readers to buy yet another text of this kind that will offer yet another subset of individual obstacles and choices that will result in triumph for the heroine. This

language of individualism, of personal choice, is unsettling in the end, however, because the reader senses that while the heroine has been able to make the right choices, she, the reader, may not have the resources, wit, or otherwise ability to perform white mainstream femininity so successfully. Chick Lit texts attempt to normalize whiteness to some degree; a woman's success in these novels is tied tightly to her ability to choose. Success is measured by one's ability to make the right choices in regards to beauty, clothes, accessories, men, professional behavior, and economic and social prestige. This normalizing process, however, is not without its moments of resistance when heroines reveal what is at stake for conforming to popular images of white femininity and the inherent pressures of the makeover process that push women to conform. These illuminating moments are what make this genre fertile ground for exploring tensions of race, class, and gender.

This chapter begins by analyzing how Chick Lit establishes whiteness in the texts and how heroines are ultimately persuaded to conform to performances of privileged white femininity even while, along the way, attempts are made to resist. While their inability to resist mainstream understandings of white beauty suggests how strong the discourse to conform is, I am interested in how they attempt to resist and how—in drawing attention to the very performativity of white beauty standards—they question the very viability of such a project to maintain racial and gendered codes. The heroine expresses hesitation at conforming, but in the end she always succumbs to mainstream representations of white femininity and appears happy as a result. These endings work for the reader, I believe, in that they provide a superficial resolution that satisfies her. However, underneath this is an unresolved tension that the heroine is not completely happy—that such a transformation was unnatural, forced, only an act. Such an ending suggests both white women's inability to confront the privilege that comes with such

conformity as well as the author's inability to envision an alternative to adopting white beauty standards or theorize the risks of conforming in this way.

While the women's movements of the 1960s opened doors to the professions—an opportunity that held the most promise undoubtedly for white women—Chick Lit heroines exhibit extreme dissatisfaction with the workplaces they inhabit. While most heroines in Chick Lit texts are involved in the publishing/editing industry, many heroines have equally unfulfilling professions, including Kindergarten teacher, seamstress, comedienne, counselor, temp worker, lawyer, event planner, PR specialist, small business owner, college prep counselor, etc. This dissatisfaction and inability (or unwillingness) to work toward change on a structural level regarding work conditions leads the heroines to transpose this need for control onto their bodies. As heroines locate a culture of feminism in the female body, they understand their bodies to be the chief mechanisms by which they interact with the world around them, and their decisions to discipline the body in different ways are methods for achieving agency. Her body is the one thing the heroine has immediate unrestrained control over, thus she uses it as the vehicle through which and on which she exerts control. Empowerment for these women is accomplished by using their bodies in various ways to advance their professional, as well as personal, lives.

Many Chick Lit heroines prove to be dissatisfied with their careers, and they long for ways to be in control of their lives. Disciplining the body—whether it be through subversive stunts performed at work, fashion or beauty makeovers, regulation of food, or expressions of sexual agency—becomes an act of courage.<sup>9</sup> The novels *Fashionistas* by Lynn Messina and *L.A. Woman* by Cathy Yardley portray heroines who attempt to resist conforming to mainstream

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<sup>9</sup> Having now read dozens of Chick Lit novels, these are the chief ways I understand heroines to be exerting and maintaining control over their lives. The novels I have chosen to examine in this chapter seem to me to be most reflective of this insight. One of the methods I didn't get a chance to discuss here, but which would be worthy of



images of white privileged femininity. The problem with these acts of resistance, of course, is that they are couched in the discourse of individualism and choice that plagues Chick Lit rhetoric and postfeminism in general. In the end, the heroine's desire to be in control of her life results in conformity to mainstream representations of white beauty, as she realizes "femininity [to be] defined as a bodily property, rather than a social structural or psychological one" (Gill 496). Throughout the texts, the language of "choice" becomes synonymous with the language of "deviance," and the heroines believe their actions to be asserting a new empowered self who defies traditional gendered expectations. This process of relocating femininity in the body or, indeed, "as bodies," "makes [the heroines] morally responsible for disciplining the body/self as post-feminist, neo-liberal subjects" (Gill 498). For these women, lifestyle choice is the means to empowerment—a method available only to very few women in America, yet normalized in these books as the only, and necessary, method. So, while the heroines attempt to resist mainstream representations of beauty, these attempts prove futile as the authors stress the need to conform to a very specific culture of white femininity. As such, these narratives overall reflect tension regarding the pressure to conform, as there often exist no real meaningful or viable alternatives.

This chapter is organized in three parts in an effort to move the reader through a discussion of the expectations women face to conform to dominant expressions of white codes of behavior and beauty culture and the places in the texts where I find resistance. The first part offers insight on how a culture of white femininity is established in Chick Lit and how a popular myth addressing professional white women's involvement in the work force is challenged. This section illustrates a method Chick Lit heroines are using to complicate understandings of women's relation to their work. In their attempt to dismantle the female hierarchy of power at

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further examination in this respect, is the obsession over the intake and restriction of food as a means of exerting control. See especially Deborah Blumenthal's *Fat Chance* or any books in the in the BiggerGirl subgenre.

work in order to gain legitimacy and open up possibilities for meaningful work, Messina calls into question the popular “opt out” myth. I then move into a discussion of how Chick Lit narratives normalize a makeover process that seeks women’s compliance in standards of white beauty models and how, in participating in such makeovers, heroines call attention to the political aim to posit white femininity as the standard by which others should measure their success. The last section discusses the most compelling method of resistance to the mainstream ideology of white femininity wherein heroines and other periphery characters experiment with expectations associated with traditional women’s roles and use methods of sexual agency to assert control and achieve happiness. The heroine usually oscillates between sexual experimentation and commitment, often choosing some variation of singleness in a culture where heterosexual coupledness is clearly valued both in law and in popular media. In this last section, I argue that the most progressive act of resisting notions of white femininity can be found in how heroines eschew marriage in favor of exploring one’s sexuality and one’s ability to use sex as power.

### Chick Lit and the Culture of Whiteness

Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* argues that critics, when analyzing texts where the dominant race presented is white, have a tendency to ignore race. She asserts: “the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture” (9-10).<sup>10</sup> Avoiding discussion of whiteness effectively prevents one

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<sup>10</sup> Like Rebecca Aanerud, I am not trying to appropriate discussions of race or diminish them in any way by foregrounding a discussion of whiteness. What I wish to do is locate whiteness within political discussions of race to analyze ways in which hegemonic systems of power are developed through, in this case, the invisible, unmarked, and naturalized white female body. I position myself in opposition to those scholars who remain silent on whiteness

from being able to analyze how prominent American authors through time have assumed their readers to be white and the implications for such writing. Morrison contends that a more serious study of whiteness is needed to flesh out the impacts of white authors writing unmarked white characters into their texts. As Morrison points out, prominent white male authors have long assumed their readership to be white and have written into their texts all-white casts—a process that encourages whiteness as a race to “operat[e] as an unmarked racial category” (Aanerud 37). Drawing on Toni Morrison’s theory of the nature and function of literary whiteness in the American canon, Rebecca Aanerud declares that “whiteness cannot be understood as a singular entity, existing prior to or apart from other categories of identities . . . the meaning of whiteness . . . is not monolithic” (37). Instead, Aanerud concludes, “its construction and interpretation are informed by historical moment, region, political climate, and racial identity” (37). Much, if not most, of mainstream Chick Lit revolves around the personal and professional everyday lives of white women with disposable income. They suffer from an intense desire to control their lives professionally and sexually, and to conform to popular representations of white femininity. While whiteness is made to look stable, straight-forward, and apolitical, the texts engage different methods of establishing whiteness that prove it to be the manufactured and political ideological struggle that Morrison and Aanerud examine.

Whiteness is usually established very early on in Chick Lit texts via the method Morrison discusses. In her own words, “We know the character is white . . . because nobody says so” (qtd. in Aanerud 37). Chick Lit attempts to normalize a culture of white femininity by presenting lead

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as an area of theoretical research—thinking this a more liberal stance—as well as those who focus *solely* on discussion of the victims of whiteness (though this is of course an important area of study), and, lastly, those who believe foregrounding issues of whiteness will undoubtedly return us to examining and praising only white books, authors, and characters. Instead, as Toni Morrison suggests, we must focus on “the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it” in order to illuminate provocative and fruitful studies of whiteness and “interrup[t] the predominant representation of whiteness as racially neutral” (Morrison 11 and Aanerud 38).

characters as unmarked or unraced. *Fashionistas* opens with the following dialogue:

‘Vig, what does your roommate look like?’

‘She’s tall and blond and has green eyes.’

‘Does she have a boyish figure like yours?’

‘Uh...’

‘Is she a stick, a lollipop, a drainpipe with no dents?’

‘Uh...’

‘We’re talking completely flat. Not a curve to be found . . .’

‘Uh...’

‘Because if she has any shape at all, it won’t do. We need flatter than the salt plains of Utah. We’d use you, but company policy prevents us from employing our own employees.’

As *Fashionistas*’ managing editor seeks out “a girl just like you [Vig]” for a lead story on bridesmaids with bad figures, an ideal version of white femininity is created via the description of its opposite—a shapeless woman with no curves or a plus-size woman whose only positive feature is a “pretty face” (Messina 9). Both the ideal and undesirable female figures are white—a fact we know because race is not mentioned. Interestingly, what we have here is a concern over body image and body size. Not only is the ideal woman white, she is also curvy—but not too curvy. We know from page one that Vig is close to the ideal representation of white femininity, minus a few curves. As Vig goes on to describe the place where she works—“a shrine to celebrit[ies]” that places these idols “in the center of the altar for maximum exposure”—she namedrops the celebrities the magazine focuses most on (Messina 14). All are white. We learn that every year an article is run on the “classic style of Jackie O or the effortless grace of Grace

Kelly”; instructions are given for how to “steal Gwyneth’s arched brow or Nicole’s flowing tresses” (Messina 26 and 14). The magazine *Vig* works for stands as a memorial to dominant white beauty culture year after year.

When new characters who play key roles in the text are introduced, such as the new managing editor from Sydney named Marguerite, she is described as “a striking woman in a classic black dress . . . carrying a Chanel bag. She has an Audrey Hepburn thing going, with her long cigarette holder, her string of pearls and her tall, thin frame” (Messina 17). The novel identifies the characters as white by using references to celebrities as well as designer fashion items. The book normalizes whiteness as the standard by which women should desire to live, and it does this by establishing whiteness as a style—as something one can possess by emulating celebrities and fashion trends. By constructing whiteness in a way that presents it as the norm, *Fashionistas* prevents readers from considering the social and political maintenance of whiteness clearly going on in the book. As Aanerud points out, although “the construction of whiteness depends on dynamic social, political, and historical factors,” whiteness is often constructed in American literature as “racially neutral”—especially in literature by and/or about whites (37). Dyer argues that representation of whiteness as the normative, or “the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being human,” is deeply problematic in how it aims to keep whiteness unmarked, and hence not discussed (qtd. in Aanerud 37). In a text like *Fashionistas*, white is assumed to be the norm, the baseline, the style that exudes a model expression of femininity.

Morrison also discusses how critics tend to focus on instances of oppression when they study minority black characters in texts dominated by white characters. Such studies fail to acknowledge the many other political uses of the black character within the white text. Morrison argues that minor, black characters in the works of Hemingway and Poe, for example, serve

more than a stereotypical, flat role in the texts and that they deserve more critical attention. The black, or “Africanist,” presence is needed, she argues, to shore up the whiteness of the master characters (Morrison 51). By presenting the black character as “nameless, sexless, nationless,” and often without voice or, at the other extreme, as exhibiting “alien, estranging dialect,” the white author succeeds in showing the reader how the white protagonist is “knowing, virile, free, brave, and moral” (Morrison 73, 52 and 70). It is in establishing “a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom” through the portrayal of the black character that the “qualities” of the white protagonist are “enhanced” and achieve significance (Morrison 7 and 53). In other words, manipulating the presentation of the black presence is necessary to establish positive definitions of whiteness. Huck Finn’s freedom and growth into a moral character would have no meaning, Morrison contends, without the presence of the black slave. Without a portrayal of enslavement, the concept of freedom would not exist.

Chick Lit shores up white femininity by clearly marking non-white characters. Non-white characters appear very infrequently in the mainstream Chick Lit texts I read and are always marked with a descriptor of their race, i.e., “Mexican” or “black.” When a non-white character does play a significant role in a Chick Lit text, as the black nanny named Deloris does in Risa Green’s *Tales from a Crib*, her traits are highlighted as opposite from the heroine’s—she is presented as neurotic, sassy, unreasonably demanding, mysterious, and, in this case, a master of Voodoo plotting to steal the heroine’s baby away from her. A brief analysis of Green’s character helps to uncover a chief way that whiteness is conceptualized in the genre.

Filled with images of Mary Poppins in her mind, Lara Stone asks a nanny agency to hire someone to help her with the overwhelming demands of new motherhood. Expecting to see Julie

Andrews “standing before me with a carpetbag in her hand,” Lara is rather disappointed to find, instead, “a large black woman carrying one of those hard, leather, avocado-green suitcases from the 1970s” standing on her doorstep (Green, Tales 28). The strong contrast is created here between what the heroine imagined she would see and the reality of the situation. Reasoning to herself that “Mary Poppins . . . can be updated for the twenty-first century,” Lara reluctantly accepts the black nanny, who, she reasons, must be “six feet tall, maybe two hundred and twenty or two hundred and thirty pounds” (Green, Tales 28). With such outdated accessories, a large build, and black skin, Deloris stands in stark contrast to the Mary Poppins Lara imagined. As Deloris begins to take care of the baby, successfully quiets the colicky infant, gets her to sleep in her bed, and last longer between feedings, Lara cannot comprehend how someone—especially the nanny whom she later accuses of practicing voodoo and placing spells on her baby—can mother better than she can.

As Morrison notes, it is s/he who holds the “power of looking” and the power of naming who achieves the status of authority (73). By creating a black character who is described as history-less, large and menacing, and a practitioner of mysterious rituals, the author ensures that Lara’s character will be understood as rationale, moral, and superior. Unfounded fears of Dolores based on catching her “standing in the middle of the room with her eyes closed, turning in circles and waving a stick with one hand . . . [and] tossing out handfuls of some kind of powder every time that she turns” and harboring “candles, bottles of oil, a miniature alligator head, a stack of colored incense sticks, a tiny black cauldron . . . and a collection of little straw people” on her bedroom bookshelf leave Lara worrying she has “left the baby alone with a perfect stranger” who is probably “a voodoo high priestess on the FBI’s ten-most-wanted list, and who may be responsible for a series of ritual sacrifices that involved the deaths of several infants in nine

different states” (Green, Tales 50 and 66). Against the backdrop of such an unstable, mysterious, and potentially harmful black nanny, Lara’s misgivings regarding new motherhood are meant to become honorable in the reader’s mind, her actions commendable.

Dolores is presented as the primitive, Othered, black woman whose success with the baby can only be explained via magic spells and unfounded assumptions based on her Jamaican accent and lack of history. The ultimate goal for Lara is to be as successful with her baby as Dolores is—to find the inner strength and patience that will allow her to mother effectively. As long as Dolores is performing motherhood, it is questioned and regarded as some kind of evil magic spell. When Lara finally accomplishes a successful performance of motherhood (as we’ll see in Chapter Four) she must adopt and adapt the methods Dolores uses to satisfy the baby. In a sense, she must take Dolores’ methods and “whiten” them. In this way, Dolores represents the primitive, mysterious caretaker model that stands in a direct contrast to the more inherent and natural caretaking qualities that Lara must find. As Morrison suggests, the black character here is used to provide a contrast to Lara; though she produces the desired effects of motherhood—the calm and satisfied infant who dotes on her—her methods are unacceptable, questionable, and to be feared. White femininity in this space is defined as a choice the mother must make to dig deep and tap into her maternal instinct; she must be willing to form a lasting and nurturing relationship with her new baby in the proper way. Motherhood, in other words, is only truly accomplished when it is performed by the white woman. Such a treatment of one of the only women of color that appears in significant detail in a Chick Lit text is frightening, to say the least. The anxiety surrounding the inability of the white woman to perform motherhood reveals the underlying tensions of what qualities ultimately define the good mother and who is capable of these. In this situation, the black character “define[s] the goals and enhance[s] the qualities” of the white



heroine (Morrison 53).

A culture of whiteness is indeed the norm in Chick Lit texts, yet many heroines highlight the performative qualities necessary to ascribe to codes of white femininity. Such an act questions the unmarked, stable, apolitical status of whiteness. Chick Lit heroines in the texts I'll analyze here attempt to negotiate the demands thrust upon them to conform to popular representations of ideal white femininity by disciplining the body in several ways—an act they believe will win them some control. In pointing out the performative nature of white femininity and women's desire to resist despite strong forces to conform to mainstream definitions of whiteness, the authors spur questions about the political function of Chick Lit narratives that seek to naturalize certain expressions of race and class in a post-9/11 American reality plagued by forces of racism, sexism, and class inequalities.

“Little Surprise that the Peasants are Revolting”: Exposing the “Opt-Out” Myth

Lisa Belkin's 2003 article “The Opt-Out Revolution” made the argument that the decision to “opt out” of employment was a new trend being exhibited by women. Her article faced intense criticism when it came out because it was seen as an attempt to naturalize women's aversion to work and desire to stay home and raise families. Such a “myth,” as it is often referred to by many economists and sociologists today, distracts people from discussing real systemic labor issues facing women of differing races and classes. Reporters and scholars point out that Belkin's study relied on a very small and unrepresentative subset of data gathered from a group of wealthy, predominantly white, Ivy-League-educated American women living in urban areas who declared they had “chosen” to stay home to raise families after brief stints working in

professional careers. As Heather Hewett notes in “Telling it Like it is: Rewriting the ‘Opting Out’ Narrative,” Belkin was criticized for failing to consider those without the financial means to stay home and those women who report being “pushed out” of the labor force. The latest in a long line of empirical studies debunking the notion of “opting-out” appeared recently in an *American Sociological Review* article. Princeton graduate student Christine Percheski used statistics from government data and the Census Bureau to argue that women are, indeed, not opting out of the workforce. Frequent guest blogger for *Alternet* Kathy G reviewed the findings of this article in a blog post on *The G Spot: Politics, Economics, Feminism, Labor, Culture, Ideas*, and reiterated the fact that “the labor force participation of professional women has continued to increase . . . [with] women working longer hours” (Kathy G, “The Opt-Out Myth”). Despite striking evidence to the contrary, the Opt-Out Myth is still very prevalent in the popular media, relying as it does on a catchy postfeminist rhetoric that focuses on language of choice. As Linda Hirshman, writer for *The American Prospect* pointed out in “America’s Stay-at-Home Feminists”: “Their [the women who say they are “choosing” to opt out] words conceal a crucial reality: the belief that women are responsible for child-rearing and homemaking was largely untouched by decades of workplace feminism.” The Opt-Out myth assumes women have been granted access to all of the opportunities they wanted—including education and careers—but are “choosing” to take on the more naturally attractive roles of homemaker and caretaker. This ideology circulates in popular media because it serves to strengthen patriarchal controls and male superiority in workplaces while ignoring the realities and needs of most of the female workforce in this country.

The woman choosing to “opt out” of her career to take on the more important role of nurturer in some ways has become the most time-honored symbol of success for wealthy white

women today. The woman who “chooses” to stay home is often glorified by the popular media and normalized in journalism such as was done in Belkin’s “Opt-Out” article; the stay-at-home woman comes to symbolize progress in a society that believes the transition to motherhood to be the ultimate achievement for white women. And what way to better cement this idea? Show women who have had access to all the education one could dream of--women who have attained the ideal professional, prestigious job--and then make it look like these women would rather choose to be stay-at-home moms. Normalizing such a narrative as this not only ignores the realities of many working-class women who are working more and harder than ever before, or who are struggling to work, but it also discounts the idea that perhaps women are dissatisfied with the careers that mainstream American society constantly reminds women are available to them. Instead of attempting to capture the meaning of women’s lives in an encapsulating binary of work or stay-at-home, the Chick Lit that I examine here clarifies some of the reasons for the discontent women feel at these higher-end jobs.

Economists and sociologists alike make the claim that women are indeed being “pushed out” more than they are “opting out” because of the inability of workplaces to accommodate women’s needs of childcare, maternity leave, and flexible hours and work schedules. In her 2007 article for *Alternet* entitled “Why Working Women are Stuck in the 1950s,” Ruth Rosen confirms how America’s family policies lag behind those of other countries. She states that the United States ranks 169<sup>th</sup> of the 173 countries studied for how well it treats women on maternity leave. Her argument is that America is in a “care crisis” because it relies chiefly on women to provide care to children and aging parents but doesn’t support structural and legislative policies that allow this. She concludes that “most institutions, in fact, have not implemented policies that support family life [therefore] many women do feel compelled to choose between work and

family.” This is all more evidence, she claims, “that ‘opting out’ is, more often than not, the result of a poverty of acceptable options.” The oversimplification of the realities governing women’s choices in employment—and crafting the rhetoric of “opting out”—works to silence the voices of women who are unhappy in the professional work world for various reasons.

Chick Lit complicates this image of the “opt-out” woman who is held up as an ideal representation of white womanhood by popular media sources. Heroines expose some of the harsher realities of professions that seemed to promise opportunity, advancement, and some level of fulfillment. In the hands of these authors, the jobs instead trigger strong feelings of disappointment and disillusionment in our heroines. Far from merely “opting out” of an otherwise fulfilling profession, Chick Lit heroines express feelings of disillusionment with contemporary work conditions, including treatment by (usually female) higher-ups, pay equity, and the quality of work they are asked to do. Heroines often engage in subversive acts of revenge in an attempt to gain some control--a quest that may be unsuccessful in enacting real structural change--but one that serves to move the heroine into a more fulfilling job and demonstrate that it is still a desire of many women to find fulfilling work. Such an effort exposes the theory of “opting-out” as a myth indeed, one whose function is to encourage complicity with accepting more traditional understandings of white femininity that value the “angel in the house” model. Instead, these texts suggest that women’s interaction with work is far more complex and the heroine’s exit from the profession is more a “pushing-out” than an “opting out.”

Lynn Messina’s *Fashionistas* portrays Chick Lit heroines who expose the overly simplistic and unrepresentative opt-out myth. These characters seek to resist dominant understandings of privileged white femininity by exposing the shallowness of professional workplaces. Vig, the heroine, is an associate editor at *Fashionistas*—a celebrity magazine that

boasts to be “aggressively hip and overwhelmingly current where every glossy page drips with beauty” while it reveals itself to Vig as, essentially, “a magazine about nothing” (Messina 14). What would seem on the surface to be a glamorous job in the Big Apple is described by Vig as an “empty stillness” and “dull affair” full of meaningless meetings that concern themselves with “mind-numbing minutiae” about how to accomplish performances of white femininity (Messina 15, 16, and 11). Once the dream job for a simple mid-western girl with aspirations to become successful with a writing job in New York City, Vig’s now five-year stint at *Fashionistas* threatens to come to an end as she grows increasingly disgusted with mean, catty, and conniving female bosses who seek to overwork her and ignore her true talents for writing material more introspective in nature. Rather than engage cultural critique in her writing (something Vig longs to do throughout the book), Vig is stuck doing articles on the latest fashion trends celebrities are using to “skate-ski” in. The novel’s treatment of a magazine that purports to be the purveyor of white feminine culture shows it to be nothing more than a shallow, silly endeavor inundated with power-hungry egos and false promises of empowerment. Vig critiques the ability of such a magazine to define the standards of beauty culture and ironically visualizes her Marxist resistance in terms of “peasants” involved in a necessary uprising. The significance of working for a trendy, meaningless publication like *Fashionistas* instead of a more meaningful, political publication rests on, again, the heroine’s (and reader’s) *desire* to resist from within professions that are primarily dominated by women. Female bosses, like Vig’s and Meryl Streep’s character in *The Devil Wears Prada* film version, exemplify the kind of extreme self-absorption that comes with attaining such positions of power. Part of the project, it seems, is to continually reject this model of female success in favor of one that exhibits more humility, selflessness, and a drive to do what’s right. Furthermore, by keeping heroines within fields traditionally dominated by

women, the endings of the books reinforce these fields as distinctly feminine, and, moreover, manageable if one makes the right decisions.

Several characters in this novel express dissatisfaction at the workplace. Vig's cubicle neighbor and colleague Allison, who "start[s] to realize she was nobody, a nameless slave whose existence passed unrecorded," despises her position as associate editor of the beauty section for similar reasons, as well as for being passed up for promotion, declaring: "this is not what [I] went to Columbia for" (Messina 32). Vig's best friend Maya, whose "deadly dull work" as a copy editor leaves her feeling completely ignored at work and treated as if she's a "necessary evil that must be endured," is cut off by her agent and forced into freelance work (Messina 60 and 103). Even though Maya confesses that she has always wanted to write literature, she focuses on freelancing for magazines in the meanwhile to support herself, all the while noting her feelings of alienation and invisibility experienced at work: "I work with strangers. Nobody looks at me;" "[I] barely exis[t] to them" (Messina 159 and 59). Interestingly, while Chick Lit books are often marketed with covers that entice readers to believe in the glamour of the fashion industry, it is repeatedly presented in the novels themselves as an unappealing, dissatisfying workplace inundated with malicious bosses and the harsh realities of female-driven competitiveness. In a profession that claims to be about so much, but is really about nothing, heroines find themselves disillusioned and out of touch with what their education and degrees prepared them for.

While the rhetoric surrounding "opting-out" suggests that feminism is no longer needed because (white) women have become successful in their careers—so successful that now they can "choose" to leave it—Chick Lit suggests just the opposite. Here, twenty- and thirty-something women are anything but satisfied in their careers. As Imelda Whelehan, author of *The*

*Feminist Bestseller*, points out about the women in *Sex and the City*: “Their successes are portrayed as contributing to their misery rather than demonstrating that they have moved beyond the constraints under which their foremothers worked” (162). So while the postfeminist rhetoric that sells the book suggests women can have it all and can achieve happiness through consumption, the actual narratives detail the lives of women like Vig, Allison, and Maya who demand intellectual fulfillment from their workplaces and don’t find it. They expect that the hard work they’ve put into obtaining their degrees (often from Ivy League or other big name schools) will be acknowledged with interesting and thought-provoking work that probes their individual talents. And when it isn’t, they react in subversive (albeit humorous or silly) ways. Indeed, many Chick books begin with a heroine unsatisfied in her career who eventually, by the end of the book, finds a more promising job that utilizes (or promises to utilize) the knowledge and expertise she has gained in her field.

As Elizabeth Hale, in her essay on Nanny Lit, explains, women’s dissatisfaction with work is more than disagreement with an unruly boss: “Rather, the cause of much of the pain in these narratives may be the gap between the heroine’s expectations (and fantasy) about her working life and the reality of work . . . a gap between the protagonists’ perception of their own value and their status in the workplace” (105). Heroines are often under misperceptions about what meaningful work should look like and find the careers that they have worked hard to attain (and have often given up on or put off personal fulfillment) to be unfulfilling and demeaning. Work for these privileged professional women is like any other kind of work: often grueling, tedious, and meaningless. In this way, Chick Lit complicates the perception of privileged white women’s workplaces as ideal opportunities women may want to “opt out” of. While this resistance doesn’t draw attention to the very different realities women occupying other race and

class positions experience in matters of the workplace, it does complicate the picture mainstream society has painted of the professional white woman.

The highly gendered workspaces in Chick Lit novels focus little on rewarding professional or educational participation and growth, but rather, (mostly female) bosses in these fields—like editor-in-chief Jane in *Fashionistas* or the overly-demanding Meryl Streep of the filmic adaptation of Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*—prey on the insecurities of younger women to reward themselves with more success. Described as “ambitious climbers,” many of the higher-ups—in what is usually the field of editing, magazines, or publishing—mimic in some way Jane's ability to humiliate her underlings and completely mistreat them for her own gain (Messina 103). Jane, like Meryl Streep's character, stands as the epitome of self-absorption in work. Vig describes her as capable of “reach[ing] deep into her bag of tricks until she finds something you know nothing about” (Messina 25). Vig uses such treatment to justify her several-hour-long breaks from work where she has drinks with friends, goes shopping, and even sneaks in some movies here and there, declaring: “I'm under the supposition that I should work when I want to” (Messina 100). Because she views her work as alienating and meaningless, Vig desires a job that will reward her talents for journalistic inquisitiveness. Such a desire leads her to acquiesce to a plan aimed at taking down Jane at the risk of losing her current job. This quest for control, for self-recognition, takes ridiculous form as the novel goes on and several secret meetings in the bathroom later result in the decision to publicly humiliate Jane to the point that she'll want to resign for fear of ever showing her face in public again.

This plan involves convincing Jane to run a story on a risqué artist. Vig and the other female underlings believe that running such a distasteful story will result in Jane being dismissed by the publisher. Throughout the book, the women plot how to convince Jane to do the story, and



the book ends with Jane publicly commending the artist's work in front of hundreds who take offense at the work. Ultimately, her ability to win over the demonstrators with her quick wit and articulate voice secures her position as lead editor; the event designed to destroy her credibility has actually boosted the magazine's sales. Women like Jane are a force to be reckoned with in contemporary gendered workplaces. The point here is Vig's venture to overthrow her boss and potentially improve her work situation. This conscious act of resisting the behaviors, beliefs, and values of women in high positions of power with great material wealth is the ultimate test for the heroine. What is at stake in pursuing goals of professional and economic success? Is it worth giving up what you already have? The allure of capitalist enterprise entices the heroine and she must resist within the confines of what she knows. In this way, Vig and friends use their meaningless work days to meet and chat and devise the plan to convince the elusive but well-respected Alex Keller to include the risqué artist on his popular Bill of Events so that money- and power-hungry Jane will commit to doing a story on him. In effect, she will destroy her own reputation. Against the backdrop of a meaningless work world, Vig and friends attempt to find meaning in this quest to bring Jane down.

Vig, Allison, and Maya all desire to find pleasure in their careers. The reader feels the pangs of disappointment and despair when Vig, Allison, and Maya are consistently let down by their own expectations. The emotional distress that Vig, Allison, and Maya carry around is ultimately created largely by a lack of recognition at work and the unending desire to be acknowledged as accomplished women. Although she consumes and wears the right brands—Jimmy Choo strappy sandals, Emanuel Ungaro pants and Lip Glass lipstick by MAC—Allison's "finished product" refuses to "pull together in the right way" (Messina 31). Allison spends her days sitting in her cubicle holding long, boring, and repetitive conversations with friends and

family—so many so that Vig, although she’s not even friends with Allison, knows her life story and can imitate her talk, cadence, and expressions to the tee. It is Allison, in her quest to move up in the world of editing, who masterfully invents and pitches the plan to overthrow Jane. Both Allison and Vig, unlikely companions in a common quest for fulfillment and selfhood, agree to the plan. Such action, while it points to sincere dissatisfaction with professional life, echoes postfeminist rhetoric that depoliticizes and individualizes feminist agency--equating feminist social goals with individual lifestyles choices. Although the book is, on one level, communicating problems present in women’s professional realms and suggesting that women’s intense desire for professional and economic success is equally as dangerous as men’s, the superficial answer is to *choose* how you want to change your workplace. If the women can just change their workplace, the reasoning goes, they will assert agency, gain voice, and feel satisfaction. Elizabeth Hale considers the dangerous implications of such a superficial ending: “The implication is that the workplace can never be changed . . . the protagonist leaves the job somehow, retains her virtue but isn’t able to change the employer or the situation” (115). This kind of ending is exactly the lure of Chick Lit. The genre raises serious questions about women’s happiness in the professions and reveals tensions women feel about the dangers of subscribing to capitalist modes of success. The book is a strong indictment of power-hungry women who, in the end, seem to maintain their positions—leaving the heroine with only one choice: to leave. The novel, then, falls prey to the rhetoric of choice to superficially solve these dilemmas and create that false sense of empowerment in the reader.

When Vig pens an investigative piece that looks into the effects success can have on a designer and gets praise from a *Times* editor followed by a job offer to head up a new magazine focused on similar concerns, Vig enters Jane’s office hoping to get some kind of recognition for

the time she's spent there, something "small and heartfelt and sincere like thank you or good luck" (Messina 226). Receiving no such recognition from her self-absorbed boss, Vig imagines "drawing the lines instead of coloring them in," as she anticipates how the career move would allow her to be in charge of her own destiny and find satisfying work that rewards her character (Messina 233). Vig has, in effect, left one dissatisfying job for another potentially dissatisfying one instead of changing anything at her workplace. This kind of ending works for the reader because it communicates a powerful message that (white, professional) women can find their way into better, more fulfilling jobs without having to really change anything. They can, instead, draw on their wit and desire to succeed. Despite her well-intentioned (though humorous) attempts to overthrow the current female hierarchy and upset the oppressive conditions under which she works, *Fashionistas'* Vig shows that such a quest is doomed to fail in that such structures will remain intact. The only option for the disgruntled white professional woman is to move on to another job that, while presented as both the ultimate escape from the confining work conditions of the previous job and the shining promise of new potential, threatens to become a replica of the former job. The heroine's decision is often vindicated by learning later that the boss under whom she worked gained some humility or insight into her own deceitful or greedy nature.<sup>11</sup> This vicious circle of events the heroine goes through in search of a meaningful career and professional identity illustrates the role one's line of work plays in the formation of the postmodern urban feminine identity. The narrative ends with Vig finding a more rewarding career thanks to her own resourcefulness and luck in enticing someone at *The Times* to read and

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<sup>11</sup> Nearly every Chick Lit book ends with the heroine moving into a different professional job, starting her own business, or moving companies. See *The Nanny Diaries* for an example of how the heroine's misgivings about her employer are affirmed when, after she quits working for the X's, she receives notice that Mrs. X has divorced Mr. X and has even addressed Nanny's concerns regarding paying more attention to her son. Similarly, in *The Devil Wears Prada*, the heroine's actions to rebel against her self-absorbed boss and embrace humility and selflessness are vindicated upon finding out that her boss has not, and will not, change because of her intense, self-stated desire for power and wealth.

acknowledge her work. Such an ending exposes the falsity behind the myth of “opting out;” instead, the actions of the female characters throughout the book show how desperately they want these careers and professional recognition despite the common inability to attain them. In the end, Vig’s “choice” to leave *Fashionistas* and work at *The Times* works on a superficial level by reinforcing the belief that agency can be achieved by merely tapping into wit and resourcefulness. But because we remain unconvinced that Vig’s venture into the professional world of *The Times* will be any better, we are left contemplating the unsolved problems in women-centered and contemporary professional workplaces.

Heather Hewett explains what is accomplished by using the rhetoric of choice rather than attacking structural problems that prevent or hinder women’s advancement or fulfillment in work:

It’s a lot easier to use a rhetoric of personal choice (so popular in this country, and so dominant at this particular moment) than to acknowledge the greater forces that often compel us to make certain choices. The latter runs the risk of inviting questions and of being constructed as ‘complaining’ in a culture where we’re supposed to be agents of our own freedom . . . Thus the rationale of ‘opting out’ may be more comforting and socially acceptable than the assertion that [women’s] employment options are often circumscribed by factors that can’t be overcome by ingenuity or will.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the fact that the novel ends with Vig making a choice about her employment, *Fashionistas* presents a heroine who complicates the notion that expanding access to the professions has been rewarding for white women and that said women are now “opting out” of such careers to pursue more naturally fulfilling activities. In expressing fears of feeling invisible

as well as overall disillusionment with professional work, the characters here call the myth of “opting out” into question. They consciously attempt to navigate the rungs of the workplace to improve working conditions and leave the reader wondering how promising Vig’s move is going to be and how damaging her inability to effect any structural change at *Fashionistas* will prove to be to the next aspiring editor who takes her place. For an ending undoubtedly meant to satisfy readers wishing to assert their own agency in the workplace (or maybe who wish they were even in such a place to begin with), the narrative as a whole demystifies the concept of “opting out.” Vig is involved in finding herself in the work world; the book is very much a journey through women’s work places. In criticizing the models held up as pinnacles of female success, the books raise questions about the purpose and potential of professions dominated by women.

On a deeper level, the novel communicates a sense of apprehension for the reader because it points to the inability of these women to really change anything regarding work conditions. While many women can perhaps relate to going through struggles at work—whether with bosses, working conditions, pay equity, preferential treatment or the like—I would like to think that many of us would actually like to see these things fixed. Chick Lit acknowledges some of the issues behind women’s dissatisfaction with work, but it doesn’t provide any real solutions. For the reader who wants actual policies and actual changes to take place so that women’s needs are better addressed in the workplace, superficial endings like this fail to do justice to the real concerns facing women today in regard to labor issues. But if we take a step back and look at how Chick Lit broaches the topic of women’s concerns with work--women finding work intellectually dissatisfying, women coming to terms with their (mis)understanding of second wave feminism’s promises--then knowing that many women are reading the genre and nodding their heads as the heroine struggles to find meaningful work is significant.

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<sup>12</sup> Accessed through <http://www.mothersmovement.org>.

## Stylizing the White Chick: Moments of Resistance in Narrative Makeovers

Women today face intense pressure to meet the particular ideals of beauty associated with mainstream white femininity as seen in glossies, on television, in celebrity culture, and, as I'll argue, in Chick Lit. In such a media-saturated society as ours, pop culture movements like Chick Lit are not so much *tangential* to our realities as much as they actually work to *construct* our realities. Many Chick Lit novels contain makeover narratives where the woman undergoes changes in appearance that she is often talked into by other women characters presented as more progressive or subversive—women who present the changes as “choices” that will empower her. Wearing certain brands and exhibiting conformity with certain styles of beauty in terms of hair, makeup, and weight tend to move Chick Lit heroines who often begin the books as homely, unsatisfied, shy, or nonconformist in attitude toward mainstream representations of white femininity. Changes in style intrigue the heroine because they masquerade as deviant behaviors that promise to afford her with more agency in the workplace or in her love life. These changes ultimately entice the heroine because they lead her to believe that she is being resistant, deviant, and progressive when indeed her acquiescence to such makeovers, in the end, aligns her with dominant cultural representations of white femininity.

The heroines examined in this chapter question these gendered expectations and call attention to the performative quality of white femininity during certain telling instances of resistance in the text. Moments of sincere doubt resonate throughout plots that center on the necessary transformation of the nonconformist white woman to the ideal image of the modern, urban, white professional woman. These brief instances of insight where the heroine reveals

doubts or reflects on the limitations of ascribing to mainstream white beauty culture emphasize the politics of performance of whiteness in these texts. In highlighting the performance of white femininity, Chick Lit texts question the very process by which they maintain the idea of a true, identifiable, stable idea of white femininity. As Judith Butler contends, certain acts and gestures performed by the body function to “produce the effect of an internal core of substance” (Butler, The Reader 110). This “organizing gender core,” Butler argues, is really “an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (Butler, The Reader 110). In other words, outward acts performed by the body function to localize white femininity within the body and the “self of the actor” so that the social and political forces that *really* create and maintain white femininity are “displaced from view” (Butler, The Reader 111). By locating agency and resistance in the white female body, the “fantasy” of a true white female gender that can be attained and maintained via various methods of disciplining the body is reinforced.

In her 1991 bestseller feminist work *Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf argues that popular women’s magazines in America have always worked as “one of the most powerful agents for changing women’s roles”; “they have consistently glamorized whatever the economy, their advertisers, and, during wartime, the government, needed at that moment from women” (64). Wolf demonstrates how magazines “swung into full force” depicting new representations of Post-WWII domesticity and femininity, hoping to steer many reluctant women back into the home (64). Today’s magazines, Wolf argues--with their fixation on beauty culture and products--rely on another related ideological aim. Once the feminist work of the 1960s and 70s women’s movement waned—once “women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity”—“the beauty myth” maintained by “the diet and skin care industries” became “the

new cultural censo[r] of women's intellectual space" (Wolf 10-11). Although women were entering professional fields in droves, Wolf contends, the resulting "real fear, on the part of the central institutions of our society, about what might happen if free women made free progress in free bodies" instigated the rise of an entire culture industry that, by preying on women's insecurities regarding their looks, could keep women down (28-29). With women's entrance into powerful public positions in the 1980s came the "violent backlash against feminism" Wolf terms the "beauty myth" (10). This oppressive myth encourages women's conspicuous consumption in order to attain unattainable representations of popular beauty standards (10). Popular representations of beauty are controlled by men, Wolf argues, and serve as men's way of oppressing women.

By taking power back into their own hands and fashioning their femininity how they want it, Chick Lit heroines attempt to overturn the notion that beauty culture is controlled by men and that it marginalizes women. Instead of viewing conformity to these standards as oppressive, Chick Lit has re-packaged such conformity as "choices." These "choices," often communicated as acts of deviance, are supposed to liberate women by accentuating their individual features, personalities, and self expressions. While Wolf emphasizes men's involvement in perpetuating and selling the myth, Chick Lit reveals women as the ones most concerned with pressuring other women to conform to these ideal standards of white beauty. In one sense, Chick Lit takes men out of the equation; instead, women-centered communities abound to confer and award status. This is all done under the guise of doing "feminist" work that will liberate the (usually younger and/or more naïve) woman. Women's complicity is achieved via the seductive allure of the language of individualism espoused by other female characters in the novel presented as more "deviant" or "progressive." It is the job of the older, more mature,



more progressive, more experienced woman to educate the naïve woman on how to achieve agency in the city space. Books like *L.A. Woman* highlight how the ridiculous expectations set by the beauty culture industry threaten to control women, and women's fallible efforts to avoid such conformity. The heroine is often shown being influenced, pressured, and belittled by a more "knowledgeable" and "experienced" female friend who represents the kind of desired femininity that the heroine should conform to. This model woman convinces Sarah, the heroine of *L.A. Woman*, to undergo a fashion and beauty makeover that will get her closer to embodying this ideal femininity. In depicting an everyday woman who strives not to give in to popular representations of beauty but ultimately does—a process that seemingly "liberates" her—Yardley suggests that white femininity is indeed a performance that places unreachable demands on young women to conform to mainstream images of beauty culture.

The absence of men playing any role in defining or maintaining beauty culture is both a hopeful wish and a dangerous reality. On the one hand, portraying women as the enforcers of beauty culture suggests that heroines and authors would like to believe fashioning their identities (and gaining agency in this way) is possible, rather than something dictated by someone else. On the other hand, leaving men, or, for that matter, the larger structural systems of oppression at work in defining concepts of women's beauty out of the conversation is dangerous; it both avoids the larger discussion that needs to take place and risks blaming women for their marginalized position. Putting the fate of women into women's hands communicates an honest hope that women in positions of power would remember how difficult that position was to attain and would understand their female underling's concerns. The tension that the books reveal regarding how workspaces dominated by women came to be anything but supportive is troubling because we want to believe that women help each other out in a patriarchal society, such as ours.

Portraying these female-dominated worlds is a way for the author to work through those hopes, expectations, and resulting disillusionment. It is ultimately a comment on the (mis)understandings many young women today have inherited about second wave feminism—this idea that women advancing in the professional world would lead to increased opportunities for financial and professional success, and, hence, personal happiness.

This method for achieving agency is rife with obvious complications for the women without the means, ability, or desire to conform to beauty culture in this way because of complexities arising from race or class. On a theoretical level, Judith Butler contends that one is constantly performing gender within a set of cultural norms we do not choose. No actor performs her intentions of gender; instead she performs the repressive, cultural norms that “limit the actor in the situation” (Butler, The Reader 345). As such, those bodies that do not conform to the binary constructions of gender--in this case the dominant expression of white femininity--are rendered false and unintelligible. There is no space, in many of these novels, for an alternative to the dominant ideology of white femininity, a fact that further enforces Butler’s contention that gender becomes “a corporeal style and a copy of a copy” (Butler, Undoing Gender 59). *L.A. Woman*’s Sarah initially resists conforming to mainstream images of beauty, but the intense pressure she feels from Martika—who uses the language of choice to convince Sarah that modifying her appearance would be liberating—proves the tight ties that still exist between professional success and conceptions of personal fulfillment, and adherence to mainstream beauty culture. The heroine’s reluctance to emulate styles of white privileged femininity reveals key instances of doubt in the text where Sarah ponders what attaining this privileged style of femininity means. Her makeover process, at its core, questions one of the methods by which dominant ideologies of gender work to define the norm—by naturalizing concepts of white

beauty.

Cathy Yardley's *L.A. Woman* tells the story of 25-year-old Sarah from Fairfield in Northern California—a region far from the mecca of civilization that is L.A. These humble origins earn her the titles of “nun,” “bore,” “wallflower,” “Norwegian waif,” and “virgin schoolgirl,” among others, and draw attention to the distinction between the empowering characteristics associated with big city life—sexual experience, nightlife, culture, excitement, adventure, color—and the dullness of everywhere else. When Sarah moves to L.A. in pursuit of a fresh start with her career (she's been through three jobs in four years), she is engaged to Ben. Although Sarah has visions of the two getting married and understands Ben's chief role as financial anchor, Ben's interests lie in another woman—a fact that finally leads Sarah to open herself up to the possibilities that L.A. holds for her. As another woman tainted by the dissatisfaction of one crappy job after another that make her “want to vomit every time [she] go[es] in in the morning,” Sarah's more conventional friend Judith suggests she put up with the mistreatment and “pay her dues,” a process Judith promises she'll “get used to” (Yardley 76 and 90). Voicing no intention to do this, Sarah asserts: “”But I don't want to get used to it!” and slowly subjects herself to Martika's outlook on feminine agency in the city (Yardley 81). Martika, the sexually experienced, anti-commitment, pleasure-seeking L.A. singleton socialite, is presented as the voice of feminism and liberation for Sarah. Martika informs her of the possibilities open to her now that “This is just the beginning” (Yardley 103):

You're just twenty-five. And you're in Los Angeles. You don't need to have all the answers. You don't need a man. You don't need a career path or a Palm Pilot or some fucking heathered oatmeal sweater from Abercrombie & Fitch as you wait for your husband to give you fifteen precious minutes of his time to start

two-point-five kids!” (178)

Feminine agency here is contrasted to succumbing to traditional expressions of heterosexual love that involve marriage and kids. Furthermore, fashion and beauty makeovers are supposed to aid the single urban woman in forming her identity and communicating the kind of empowered self she wishes to become.

When Sarah first arrives in L.A., she comes across as a complete social outcast as she eats alone at trendy restaurants, unknowingly rents a place in the gay district, and wears unfashionable clothing that communicates insecurity and self-confidence, according to Taylor and Martika. When Taylor, Martika’s outspoken gay friend, befriends Sarah in a restaurant, he declares: “She’s sweet . . . she’s like a little doll. You just want to stuff her in a backpack and take her home, put her under glass on your mantel” (Yardley 96). Sarah’s dress, makeup, and hair communicate foreignness in the city. Martika confirms Taylor’s impression of Sarah as naïve, uninformed, and prude when she says, in a demeaning tone, “You’re so cute, I could eat you up with a spoon” (Yardley 48). Sarah becomes for Martika and Taylor “a project”, “a poor girl” who definitely “has potential,” but desperately needs “some work” in order to attain the true emancipated status of a city woman (Yardley 98 and 104). Sarah, as she initially appears, is incomprehensible to Martika, who represents the voice of liberation and feminism in the text. As Butler argues: “It is not possible to exist in a socially meaningful sense outside of established gender norms . . . If human existence is always gendered existence, then to stray outside of established gender is in some sense to put one’s very existence into question” (Butler, Undoing Gender 527). Disciplining and accessorizing the body plays an important role in determining successful performance of white femininity, as Sarah’s original expression of white femininity is unacceptable. As Butler notes, acts and gestures such as those Sarah comes to embrace and

express are *performative* in that the identity they “purport to express” is a “fabrication manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs” (Butler, The Reader 110). In this way, Sarah’s makeover process points to the way in which acts, behaviors, clothing, and makeup work to masquerade as the essence of true white femininity.

Because so few women live up to the idealized images of femininity presented in glossies and other popular media sources, and because bodily imperfections women exhibit have come to communicate moral deficiencies—the overweight woman exhibits no self-control, for example—women engage in various methods of “body work” to “work on the self” (Gimlin 6). Gimlin elaborates: “By engaging in body work, women are able to negotiate normative identities by diminishing their personal responsibility for a body that fails to meet cultural mandates” (6). The makeover process proposed by Martika that Sarah acquiesces to highlights Sarah’s desire to conform to ideals associated with white femininity that have become equated with morality. Becoming feminine, and by extension feminist, in the city space is an expensive and grueling process that highlights the powerful discourse associated with white femininity and the inability to envision an alternative. Body work becomes, in a sense, a method of agency for dealing with the numbing effects of unsatisfying jobs. With Martika as guide, Sarah undergoes changes in clothes, makeup, and hair that equip her with the look she’ll need to visit trendy nightclubs and seek sexual pleasure; all resulting in revolutionizing her from social outcast to social savant within a matter of months. She moves from a committed relationship to pursuing random sexual encounters with (sometimes married) men to the seemingly empowering and permanent status of single at the end of the book.

Originally opposed to the idea of remodeling her image into something her wild girlfriend Martika calls “chic, kinky, something fun . . . Something that says ‘I eat men like you

for breakfast.' But still sexy," Sarah finally gives in, declaring she "couldn't keep her hair the way it was, that much was apparent" (Yardley 105-107). As she sits in the salon getting made up and listening to the women around her project thoughts of success and independence that her makeover will bring, Sarah notes that "it felt good . . . There was something about salons, good salons, that was like group therapy" (Yardley 107). Because, as Gimlin indicates, imperfect bodies symbolize flawed identities, Sarah acquiesces to a makeover that will enhance her single feminine status and align her more with gender standards tied to expressions of white femininity. After getting her hair done, however, Sarah has an insightful moment where she ponders the magical quality of this transformation. Such a moment stands out as a moment of resistance because she calls attention to the fantastical nature of the process and hints at its transitory nature. Wondering how long her new hair will last in its made-up state, "her fingers reach[ed] up but only touch[ed] the aura of her hair, as if by touching the hair itself the whole thing would vanish in a puff of smoke and she'd be reduced to the hedgehog looking thing she'd resembled when she walked in" (Yardley 110).

Granted she had, prior to this, erratically cut her hair over the realization that she had lost her boyfriend, the underlying implication here is that she risks being "reduced" to the woman she was prior to the makeover when her hairstyle ceases to exist in its current state. Such a moment is particularly intriguing as it communicates apprehension with both the performative and transitory nature of this makeover. If the makeover promises agency by disciplining the body in a way that will liberate her in regard to opening up opportunities for sexual experimentation and career advancement, this brief moment of hesitation reveals uncertainty that the style of white femininity she is striving for is attainable. Butler would suggest that this is exactly how ideologies of true gender are produced and how the cultural and political forces that govern

expressions of gender and identity are ignored. This moment of insight elucidates the fantastical nature of such a fabricated gendered and racialized role.

Sarah's new "frosted" hairstyle moves her from exhibiting the "usually ashy-honey blond hair" to a new look that makes her feel as if she is "running through a perpetually sun-dappled meadow" (Yardley 110). Joey, her hairdresser, gives her detailed instructions on how to keep up the do, and Martika and Taylor announce how proud they are of her. Superficial bodily imperfections have been corrected and adherence to dominant expressions of white femininity has been achieved. This makeover scene serves somewhat as the climax of the book as Sarah's character, via the change in her outward appearance, undergoes a significant change. With the makeover, Sarah seems to assert more control in terms of how she conceptualizes her ability to acquire a career and attract men for the purpose of expanding her sexual experience beyond Ben.

Pink, Sarah's new clothes designer, gives her recommendations for clothing that take into consideration the "guy-hunting component" that her clothes will need to reflect. The makeover process is couched in a language of individualism geared toward both assuming independence in a city space that demands and rewards certain representations of white, middle-class beauty *and* attracting men. The ability to attract men and engage in promiscuous sexual behavior become paramount in Sarah's quest to achieve agency. As Sarah puts it: "next time, she was going to find a guy who could truly make her sexually happy" (Yardley 239). Furthermore, with "her hair . . . now methodically kept up by Joey, her makeup . . . a tasteful blend of Lorac, Stila and Urban Decay, [and] her clothes . . . the best she could afford from Fred Segal, Bebe and some funky boutiques Pink recommended," she peers into the mirror and thinks, " 'You've come a long way, baby'" (Yardley 201). Not only does Sarah acquire more fashionable and expensive clothes to communicate her new self, she also learns how to dress for different occasions so that she can

successfully move among social settings. While dressing herself for an 80s-themed nightclub, Sarah chooses clothes and makeup that embody her present feelings of anger; she declares she is “ready to kick the shit out of somebody” (Yardley 174). Choosing scuffed up boots because she “like[d] that they’d seen some action” and makeup that made her look like a member of Sex Pistols, Sarah communicates her moods through fashion. This leaves her feeling empowered and determined—any guy attracted to her will know and accept that she can get angry sometimes.

Fashioning her femininity via Martika’s method illuminates Sarah’s movement from a seemingly boring nobody to an outspoken someone. Jessica Van Slooten is correct when she ascertains that for the consuming woman, the actual purchases are less important than the fantasies that revolve around the products. The “purchases effectively serve the person (or, more aptly, the people) she [the consumer] would like to be rather than the [person] she is” (Van Slooten 222 and 227). As long as Sarah believes herself to be resisting traditional gendered expectations by following Martika’s advise, she will perceive her attainment of dominant ideologies of beauty culture as empowering. The products she consumes, and the behaviors and styles she adopts, are all couched in the language of choice, again leaving the reader satisfied to think that she too could make similar choices to empower herself. Once again, however, the reader is left contemplating how empowering such an act is that omits discussion of how structural realities function to define dominant white feminine identity.

### Sexual Choice as Empowerment

While Rosalind Gill asserts that sexual liberation, as presented in Chick Lit books, is “mere posturing or performance—something women in a postfeminist world are required to



enact, even though it is not what they want,” I argue here that the acts of sexual freedom Chick Lit characters involve themselves in is a form of resistance (494). This section analyzes how heroines perform--in the Butlerian sense of unintentionally producing identity within the complex terrain of cultural norms available, not Gill’s understanding of performance as intentional “posturing”—sexual exploration in order to achieve agency. Our heroine experiments with two more extreme gender roles available to women—those portrayed by the rather formulaic characters of the “Sterile Wife” and “Gutsy Girlfriend” (my terms)— in an effort to find her own sexual identity and challenge dominant modes of sexual expression available to women. Our heroine often seeks a position on the continuum somewhere in between these two extremes of white feminine behavior, and she goes about finding this sexual identity by watching, observing, and experimenting with the two alternatives presented to her. Usually each of the women goes through a period where she questions the position that she currently occupies in terms of the happiness and fulfillment it provides and decides, in the end, to move toward the other end of the continuum. Our protagonist is usually surrounded by two types of girlfriends: 1) the more mature woman who currently inhabits the traditional (and stifling) committed relationship sphere and who ultimately leaves (or cheats) because she feels she has lost her independence, and 2) the wild, independent, sexually experienced girlfriend who initially vows to have nothing to do with traditional notions of commitment. More often than not, the bored and sterile wife moves toward single status as the wildly independent girlfriend moves toward a relationship. Our heroine’s visions of achieving feminine agency as she conceptualizes them in the beginning of the book—tracking and pinning down the perfect man by the age of 30—often do not materialize; instead, she embraces aspects of the two extremes and realizes in the end that what offers her the most freedom is to remain single and in control.

The difference between her and the single girlfriend is that the heroine, due to her many (mis)adventures with men throughout the book, is presented as having a heightened consciousness when it comes to considering relationships. Often, like Sarah, she has considered a relationship, but has *chosen* to remain single. The single girlfriend, by contrast, feels disgruntled with her status because she has not *chosen* it. This embracing of singleness is a departure from the prized coupledness so often glamorized through popular media outlets and instantiated still by other Chick Lit books in the MommyLit subgenre (as we'll see in Chapter Four). This style of singleness seems to resist the pressure to conform to traditional gendered expectations regarding marriage and heterosexual commitment and keeps that agency within the heterosexual matrix that Butler discusses. Heroines work within the gender binaries of single and married to find agency.

In its portrayal of the complexities surrounding married life, *L.A. Woman* challenges mainstream representations of marriage and motherhood as the ultimate destination for women. Judith in *L.A. Woman* represents the heroine's married friend. She appears to be financially and emotionally stable on the outside and is oftentimes the source of advice for our struggling heroine. When Sarah wavers about her feelings for the rich but neglectful Ben, Judith reassures her that Ben is her "stabilizing force" (Yardley 28). Furthermore, Judith is the voice of stability and conformity as she attempts to convince Sarah that when we are faced with hesitation, anger, or insecurity regarding relationships or jobs, we must "get used to it," "pay our dues," and await our rewards patiently (Yardley 81 and 90). On the surface, Judith seems to be extremely capable of balancing work and home life; she takes great pains to present herself as accomplished, determined, and committed. She makes a point of securing this image at Sarah's expense when she tells her husband that Sarah, unlike herself, changed her major four times while in college.

The married woman is unwavering in the pursuit of her career and seemingly successful in the attainment of the perfect man and perfect marriage. As the novel progresses, however, this reality morphs into fantasy as we watch Judith's carefully manicured life unravel. A marriage that requires strenuous daily tending has resulted in a predictable, rigidly structured, and unspontaneous personal and sexual life. Judith begins the novel as the model for heterosexual desire, but her marriage soon proves to be an empty, inert forced link between two strangers. Hoping to avoid sex with her husband, Judith gives in, hoping it will be over quickly:

She deliberately moaned, getting louder when his breathing picked up pitch.

When he groaned against her, she closed her eyes.

He rolled off of her and handed her her nightgown and underwear. She could feel his weight pressing down on the bed, his maneuvering his boxers back on, clumsily.

His breathing turned to snores not long after.

She put her clothes back on with a bare minimum of movement, careful not to wake him. She could picture her Filofax in her mind, mentally scheduling a call to that meditation coach after her 10:00 am meeting. Canceling her manicure. Seeing if there were a job opening for Sarah somewhere . . . maybe account management or H.R.

By the time she mentally got to the section of the day labeled Go To Bed, she fell asleep. (Yardley 30-1)

The schedule that Judith is forced to keep to excel at her job has seeped into her private life, structuring even her sex life into a bland and controlled atmosphere. This is, once again, a critique of over-professionalized lives and desires. As the novel goes on and Sarah decides to

participate in the makeover process, she expresses to Judith her desire to achieve more agency both at work and at home. Consistently the “you-can-do-it” voice for women, Judith tries to convince Sarah that she can do both. Sarah’s feeling of being overwhelmed with such pressures causes her to ask Judith if she is really happy. This question plagues Judith for dozens of pages as she ponders feelings of insanity surrounding her life because of the quick pace she’s expected to keep at her job. When Sarah tells Judith her life is “sterile” and that she should work on dismantling “the wall [she]s put around [her] life,” Judith commences to openly question her relationship with her husband and her increasing desire to pursue sexual relationships with men she meets on the Internet (Yardley 191). Judith’s unfulfillment in marriage leads her to desire other men, something that results in a face-to-face meeting with a man she has had cybersex with. Even though this man ultimately disappoints her (he was nothing what his online profile promised), he reminds her that she is not happy in her marriage. The end of the book finds her leaving her husband and running to her friends for comfort, nourishment, and a place to live. Judith’s marriage proves to be a trap that squelches expressions of identity and happiness. Far from upholding positive and traditional images of marriage, Chick Lit complicates what women go through in marriage—why they marry, why they stay married, and what they ultimately lose as a result. Many heroines in Chick Lit texts, whether the main protagonist or ancillary characters, move from marriage to single life, from despair and entrapment to freedom, suggesting that women’s feelings toward marriage are much more complex than popular media would have us believe.

Butler argues that the function of cultural and gender norms is to legitimate certain expressions of gender--to acknowledge some bodies as human and prevent other bodies from that same recognition. Bodies that do not conform are rendered invisible and unintelligible. She

reminds us that “gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time . . . through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, The Reader 114). Judith manufactures her gendered identity so strictly here that her performance of the perfect wife reveals how strictly the regulations of gender control act on her. Her inability to relinquish any part of this perfect wife image suggests that she fears being rendered unintelligible if she fails to present the self who can “do it all.” Judith’s character reveals the strict cultural norms in place that continually act to define the ideal woman and wife. The ideology of the “Superwoman” who can “do it all”—i.e., maintain a successful career and a fulfilling personal and sexual life—is so deeply entrenched in Judith’s mind that she can’t envision a way out. What Judith has created, and every day continues to create, is this illusion of an ordered, gendered self. The character of Judith seems to work through the fears women have of entering marriage and subsequently losing their “selves.” Judith’s dilemma is resolved within the parameters of the heterosexual matrix because, as Butler notes, bodies that step outside this matrix of regulations are deemed unintelligible. Judith’s act of resistance to shatter widespread mainstream ideologies of marital satisfaction and the naturalness of monogamy is one of the book’s strong points. In accepting the single life and exposing married life as a fantasy, Judith’s character appeals to readers’ desires to upset traditional gender roles and expectations.

While attaining single status is, here, an act of resistance, Butler would argue that legitimacy should not be limited to being recognized within norms of heterosexual union. I would suggest in response that for presenting itself as a postfeminist genre usually deemed conservative by critics in terms of how it addresses social concerns of race, class, and gender, the attention Chick Lit draws to the problematic state of marriage is significant. True, Chick Lit does

not usually venture to discuss lesbian or transsexual issues. Retaining agency within the confines of heterosexuality is indeed limiting; but the movement away from marriage and monogamous union upsets some of the norms in place to define mainstream feminine identity. The novel, in effect, makes the argument that agency and independence cannot be achieved within the structure of marriage. In fact, Butler argues that proliferation of sexual identities can only take place *within* existing power structures since “life” is realized there. One cannot exist in “a socially meaningful sense” outside of “established gender norms”—as feminist Donna Haraway proposes with her post-gender world (Butler, The Reader 27). We see also, in Judith’s character, that the inability to have the ideal marriage is actually what creates the desires for it. Butler discusses how fantasy thrives on limits. We see evidence of this theory when Judith professes to others (Sarah) what the ideal, married woman should be able to do. It is this fantasy and the cultural and gendered norms that surround and police it that keep Judith desiring it more and more. It proves a vicious cycle as we watch Judith comprehend and digest the limits and then attempt to structure her life accordingly. Her decision to break the cycle at the end indicates that she has come to terms with the fantastical nature of the ideal marriage and has vowed to resist it.

Like the female character who goes from married and miserable to single and satisfied, Chick Lit also employs a similar narrative device in the character of the intense, sexually ambitious single woman who ends up pursuing commitment. Throughout most of *L.A. Woman*, Martika provides the voice of the ultra-urban single career woman who despises commitment in all of its forms; she encourages Sarah from the start to get rid of Ben. Martika provides the voice of reason (via the voice of defiance) to Sarah in order to convince her that the makeover will provide her with agency. Martika is both the role model for Sarah and an example of what Sarah may become if she understands agency only in terms of sexual agency. Using sexual promiscuity

as the chief means of identity negotiation is heavily policed in this novel, as we watch Martika's character slowly come to terms with how empty her life is. While Sarah concedes to the beauty makeover Martika initiates, she ultimately chooses not to model Martika's style of sexual expression. Nevertheless, Martika's style of sexual expression that involves using sex as power and revenge upsets the notion of true binary gender roles. It is in renouncing these traditional gender roles and calling the meaning of "feminine" into question, that *L.A. Woman* attempts to "undo" some of the social restrictions maintained by dominant ideology.

Martika moves from a commitment-phobic, sexaholic, self-obsessed egotistic woman to a woman who embraces the promising potential of commitment. When Martika moves into Sarah's apartment near the beginning of the novel, she brings the only three pieces of furniture that she has had since she was twenty-two: a California King bed and two nightstands. These three material items stand for what she currently values in life and mark her identity as a single, mobile, sexually ambitious woman in the city—a place defined by movement, excitement, opportunity, and transience. She loads her nightstands with the "necessities:" "condoms and a variety of oils and other lubricants, her hand-cuffs, and a few other knickknacks she's picked up along the way . . . several boxes of cigarettes, a vibrator and a pack of gum" (Yardley 51). It becomes clear that the way Martika understands her identity, negotiates expectations of femininity, and communicates feelings is through her body—what men she fucks and how she fucks them. Her mission, when she meets Sarah, is to "corrupt her" because having feelings for just one man is, for her, ludicrous (Yardley 51). Her brashness with commitment leads to boredom with men whom she has slept with more than once (a phenomenon we see with Samantha time and time again on *Sex and the City* episodes). A vehement arguer that life should contain choice, independence, and sexual adventure, Martika justifies her inability to commit as

a conscious act of agency. While Martika continuously professes her independence and sexual experience, the reader senses the emptiness of her life—dependent on partying, drinking, and sex—compared to Sarah’s quest to find not only herself, but also what is important to her.

It becomes clear toward the end of the book just how much pent-up doubt, grief, and desire Martika has been holding inside. Paraphrasing Judith Butler, Sara Salih reminds us that heterosexuality is “the parodic effect of abandoned desires” and that “the disruptive ‘playing’ and proliferation of gender categories releases them from the binarisms in which they are currently mired” (Butler, *The Reader* 10). For Butler, the answer is not transcending gender (as in a post-gender world), but rather innovation, invention, and proliferation of existing genders located on the sexual margins. Because accomplishing social livability requires reaching a state of intelligibility within existing cultural norms, “undoing,” “panicking,” or “troubling” those norms is how Butler conceives of resistance. When Sarah upsets Martika by going home with a man she liked--something that provokes Martika to feel “poison rushing through her veins” and declare that she needs a “sports fuck the way junkies needed a fix”--we get the sense that her unresolved desires and/or grief from living this lifestyle take a toll on her (Yardley 220). The violent desire to use her body as a way of working out her frustrations with Sarah leads her to search out the one guy in the nightclub who looks “horribly out of place” and seduce him (Yardley 220). Admitting to herself that she “doesn’t need him for very long,” Martika’s interest in sex with this man is fueled by the competitive anger she feels toward Sarah for accomplishing what Martika had always tried to teach her—how to successfully attract and lay a man (Yardley 221). Declaring that she would: “show Sarah how it’s done,” Martika arouses the man with her dancing and leads him to a quiet private area, an action that happens so quickly and unnaturally that the man questions: ““this isn’t going to, er, cost me, is it?”” (Yardley 222). Such abrupt



actions on Martika's end elicit confusion over the reason for the impending sexual encounter, as it does not seem to arise from any kind of sincere interest. Rather, Martika's aim is to use the man in a sexual way to work out tensions from her personal life that have challenged her belief in how one gains agency.

Butler states in *Undoing Gender* that "being a certain gender does not imply that one will desire a certain way" (1). One of the ways to proliferate gendered identities is by undoing the norms by which we are accustomed to understanding sexual desire. Women are traditionally considered to be the more submissive sexual partners, the ones who perform more subservient, rather than dominant, roles in the bedroom. Here, we have an example of how gender performances not only can allow for, but also can embrace, a sexual empowering through sexual unknowing. The way that we would expect a Chick Lit heroine, or any woman for that matter, to engage in sex is not what occurs here. As Butler has discussed, what the author does here is attempt to render what is usually pathologized by dominant culture—the dominatrix—as a provocateur of agency. With Martika clearly in charge of the violent sex scene that follows, the novel exposes how "binary oppositions become meaningless in a context where multiple differences . . . abound" (Butler, *The Reader* 33). As with drag performances, which call into question the existence of true gender norms, this S/M performance suggests that gender is both "a norm that can never be fully internalized" and that "true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies" (Butler, *The Reader* 115 and 111). This sex scene disrupts normative views of gender relations and, in so doing, attempts to break down the power structures embedded in dominant ideologies that shape conceptions of gender roles. After vowing she could "fuck this poor guy to death," Martika spends most of the time during the sexual encounter thinking of the man Sarah stole from her (Yardley 224). She wonders if they

are having sex at the same time and then moves on to “her favorite fantasy—the gladiator/slave girl one” (Yardley 224). This sexual act can be interpreted as a cathartic moment caused by unresolved grief over Sarah stealing the man Martika wanted, her empty and unfulfilling lifestyle, or perhaps a desire for Sarah herself. Regardless of the reason, Butler assures us that acts of melancholia can serve as “a means of potential revolt rather than a site of passive self-abnegation” because they “undo” and work through pent-up desires and “hauntings” one is not usually able to express (Butler, The Reader 245). In this scene, Martika uses sex as a means of expressing her anger; sex is, once again, the primary method by which she can express herself. She is incapable of talking things out. In wanting so badly to see sex as empowering and enlightening, Martika’s acts here suggest that conceptualizing agency solely in terms of sexual exploration and gratification has its own set of problems.

Martika attempts to provide the role model for achieving agency and happiness by exemplifying the sexually free woman. Her many sexual (mis)adventures suggest an anxiety for how we are supposed to understand women’s place in the sexual sphere. While her lifestyle seems to afford her with some amount of agency, in the end she serves as the reminder that--when taken to an extreme--such pleasure for pleasure’s sake will be punished. Female sexual promiscuity is effectively policed here when we learn that Martika’s ambitious and carefree pursuit of sex will be halted by her realization that she has become pregnant as a result of this sexual encounter. While Martika’s character ascribes to dominant ideologies of femininity by the end of the book, this sexual encounter reveals a tension about what role women are expected and allowed to play in sexual relations. The novel draws attention to the woman who doesn’t conform, but is not able to make this a reality. The limits of social livability are clearly drawn here as Martika’s need for happiness and acceptance ultimately draws her back into norms

established by the cultural matrix that controls women's lives.<sup>13</sup>

More often than not, the Chick Lit heroine finds herself, by the end of the book, embracing a style of sexuality somewhere between the sterile wife and the gutsy girlfriend. She learns that marriage isn't always the answer to a woman's fate, finding instead that the relationship often stifles the woman's voice and sexual expression. On the other hand, single life that takes sex as its ultimate marker of feminine identity proves to be detrimental and not without consequences. The heroine negotiates a careful balance of finding rewarding and fulfilling sex and some level of commitment—usually with a man, but sometimes with a pregnancy or baby. Characters like Martika remind the reader that while pursuing promiscuous sexual lifestyles in the city may empower women in terms of finding their sexual identity, the gutsy girlfriend is punished, really, for taking such sexual liberation to the extreme. She serves as the reminder that there is a limit of sexual expression for women. The heroine, interestingly, often finds a way to coexist between these two extremes—making a well-reasoned yet adjustable commitment to a man who is usually her equal, rather than a man whose sexual or financial prowess serves as the connector. Sarah, interestingly, ends up in a relationship with her new interest, Kitt, without expectations for marriage or even a committed relationship.

These moments of resistance provoke questions of what is at stake for conforming to mainstream definitions of white beauty culture *and* they illustrate the strictness of the limits that enforce that conformity. The women of Chick Lit understand their bodies to be the means by which they can achieve agency and often adopt disciplinary practices in an effort to better their

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<sup>13</sup> In a similar vein, Valerie Frankel's *Accidental Virgin* portrays a heroine who realizes it has been a long time since she had sex. Obsessed with the ideas of re-de-virginizing herself, she embarks on a quest to pursue as many sexual encounters as she can. In the end, however, the heroine chooses monogamy even though she knows it may not last forever. Again, while the ending folds into dominant expectations of gender in that she ends up in a relationship, what is more attractive to readers is this desire to be promiscuous, to achieve agency in this way. Readers are attracted more to reading about her sexual (mis)adventures than her choice of monogamy at the end of the book.

lives. Authors draw attention to the very performative quality of white femininity, a process that immediately puts into question the concept of a knowable, stable, true gender role. The novels examined here complicate the notion of women's relationship with work, highlight the power physical makeovers have to normalize white beauty standards, and suggest that methods of sexual agency hold perhaps the most potential when it comes to resisting traditional gender roles. In all, I have tried to show that heroines are engaging in acts of resistance—a reality that suggests there is interest among the readership to explore such issues related to women's construction of identity and agency. The fact that the novels fold back into the dominant cultural norms by the end is less significant than the fact that they are broaching subjects that deal with women's desires for agency in contemporary urban America. The next chapter builds on this one by taking a closer look at the diverse roles men play in Chick Lit narratives. In examining the multiple different constructions and treatments of masculinity, I argue that there are more ways in which the genre as a whole seeks to critique dominant ideologies of gender.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**THINKING BEYOND PRINCE CHARMING: MASCULINITY FANTASIES IN**  
**CHICK LIT**

Feminist media critic Rosalind Gill concludes her article entitled “Rewriting the Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit” with the following statement about Chick Lit: “the inequalities, problems, and frustrated desires of heterosexual relationships—including those that relate to sexual intercourse—are rendered invisible and unspeakable through a discourse which merely offers a post-feminist gloss on ‘one day my prince will come’ (500). Gill compares contemporary Chick Lit to traditional romance novels to convey her theory that the former portrays no more progressive models of femininity than the latter. The “heterosexual coupledness” found in Chick Lit, she argues, is merely an updated postfeminist version of that found in traditional romance novels. Gill argues that although Chick Lit heroines masquerade as autonomous subjects in control of their own destinies—a performance enabled by the language of choice; they continue to define themselves in relation to men and are ultimately “saved” by a prince figure at the end of the book who serves to “make [the heroine] into a real woman” (494). Said hero “save[s] her with the chivalry, wit, and expertise she may not have herself,” helps propel her into a more rewarding career, and satisfies her newfound sexual desires (495). Gill further asserts that Chick Lit reveals “married heterosexual monogamy” as most “truly captur[ing] women’s real desires,” a blanket assertion that I find untrue after analyzing the tension and apprehension women face with realities of marriage (as demonstrated in the last chapter) (500). By essentializing the role of the male figure into that of the “hero,” Gill, along with others who accuse the genre of safeguarding traditional gender relations, fails to consider

the different roles men are taking on in these books and the ways the books tap into women's changing fantasies of masculinity. Most criticism that discusses men's roles within the books relies on this monolithic conceptualization of the man as the "hero" or "prince" figure. Such criticism prevents a consideration of how the authors work through tensions of contemporary gender relations by presenting and critiquing several different styles of masculinity.

This chapter analyzes a way in which Chick Lit subverts dominant ideologies of gender by asking the following question: What is the effect of portraying different styles of masculinity in the Chick Lit novel? What do the heroine's fantasies of masculinity reveal about contemporary women's needs? Does it serve to reinforce representations of dominant masculinity usually embodied in the wealthy, attractive, successful white man or to critique the ways in which hegemonic masculinity struggles to maintain representation in pop culture texts? This chapter examines the diverse construction of masculinities found in four Chick Lit texts—Gigi Grazer's *Maneater*, Lisa Cach's *Dating Without Novocain*, Cathy Yardley's *L.A. Woman*, and Wendy Markham's *Slightly Engaged*—to reveal how the books deal with the alpha male struggling to maintain the position of dominant masculinity in this urban American setting. Organized in this way, the texts, in their portrayal of men, build in complexity. Chick Lit authors disrupt notions of a stable hegemonic masculinity that maintains power, instead making visible the unstable nature of the historical and cultural construction of masculinity. In doing this, the texts highlight the very performative nature of modes of masculinity that seek to represent the normative as they encounter pressure from both women and other alternative styles of masculinity. While heterosexual coupledness is always privileged in the end, and strict limits are set for who can embody dominant masculinity and how, masculinity is complicated as heroines reveal the changing expectations of and resulting anxiety over how men can accommodate 21<sup>st</sup>-

century needs and desires of professional women. The ability to choose one's man from among the styles presented is represented as empowering for the heroine, even as it draws attention to the impossibility of such a privileged, and indeed fantasized, act. Similar to Radway's argument about the romance novel, Chick Lit is a genre that provides both a fantasy world for women readers obsessed with finding the ideal man *and* a platform to protest such ideals by voicing apprehension about such a quest.

While the novels show clear limits for whose bodies will count as masculine and whose will not—a project that in the end tends to reinforce dominant white heterosexual masculinity—the texts are progressive in how they subvert notions of a true, identifiable, grounded dominant masculinity. The novels prove the model man, or the "Mr. Right" Gill refers to, to be an unachievable fantasy at the same time that they encourage women to continue to search for him. Such endings, where heroines are successful at piecing together the perfect man who they feel completes their empowered urban identity, reassure readers that such a quest is worthy, empowering, and possible. Resolving complicated issues of masculinity in this way serves to pacify the reader whose fantasy of the ideal man who satisfies emotionally, sexually, and professionally remains unfulfilled yet looming in the back of her mind as a possibility. It also serves to encourage women's complicity in the political project of normalizing the alpha male. Yet, such an ending creates feelings of tension as we notice how alternative styles of masculinity represented by the metrosexual or homosexual body have been marginalized in order to shore up expressions of dominant white heterosexual masculinity. The texts also cause us to question what function fantasies of masculinity serve. The construction of masculinity in these texts points to new expectations for the contemporary man to be able to satisfy women's needs outside of the traditional spheres of commitment and marriage in ways that further her ability to attain and

maintain independence in the urban space.

While all three books tell the story of a single (or in *Slightly Engaged*, exactly that) woman who eventually ends up happily involved with a man, each highlights some telling tensions about how dominant masculinity is seeking (or failing) to negotiate the right to represent the norm and the role women are playing in shaping this negotiation. This analysis begins with a discussion of *Maneater* and *Dating Without Novocain* as fairly typical Chick Lit texts that focus on the language of choice and individualism to communicate how women desire to accessorize their lives with the right kind of man who will support them in their professional lives. Conceivably considered by many to be a simplistic and perhaps uncritical treatment of men, these two books raise questions about the common treatment of men as one-dimensional characters in Chick Lit who act as "shadow presence[s] or pleasingly pat background figure[s]" (Harzewski, "Tradition and Displacement" 38). The heroine's desire to find a man is akin to acquiring the last accessory in the long and arduous postfeminist task to "have it all"--the career, the friends, the guy, the shoes, etc. Portraying men as accessories is intriguing here because it attempts to minimize (or ignore) the role men, or patriarchy, plays in structuring gender relations--giving all of the agency instead to the woman. Furthermore, the male figure Hannah chooses deviates from the ideal model of Mr. Right that she begins the book in search of, pointing to the failure of dominant white masculinity to maintain control and the resulting desire women have to fill these voids with men who exhibit qualities other than those commonly associated with the mainstream, traditional man.

The analysis then turns to *L.A. Woman*, where I explore how Kit represents an alternative style of masculinity that lies outside the realm of both sexual fulfillment and commitment to marriage, satisfying instead the heroine's desires for emotional stability and friendship. As we



saw in Chapter Two, sexual agency holds the potential to resist the stifling confines of monogamous union that result in unhappiness. A different kind of resistance to marriage is presented in this text by the open relationship Sarah has with Kit—who wins the heroine’s heart and establishes credibility as the ultimate male figure. Their relationship does not focus on sexual fulfillment; instead, the emphasis on friendship subverts traditional modes of commitment usually prized in conservative narratives of love. Kit’s character resists pressures to conform to representations of dominant masculinity presented throughout the text, and Yardley’s juxtaposition of his character with other males who more closely embody dominant white masculinity highlights the allure of his alternative style of masculinity. Lastly, the analysis moves to the most complicated, and the most revealing, treatment of masculinity in *Slightly Engaged*. This book is involved in the project of re-masculinizing dominant masculinity and relies on the policing of both metrosexual and gay masculinity to shore up the definition of “the real man.” This policing is both dangerous—in that the stereotypical feminized qualities ascribed to the gay male character are identified as qualities the heroine desires only when exhibited in the mainstream heterosexual male body—and revealing, in demonstrating how artificial the intense struggle for dominant masculinity is.

This chapter delves further into an analysis of how, even with endings that offer superficial and seductive resolutions that appeal to readers’ desires to conform and feel that they, too, have agency via methods of choice, the books exhibit disturbing tensions surrounding the role of masculinity in defining women’s agency. The “happy” ending is troubling because it fails to really resolve the doubts and fears regarding how dominant masculinity seeks to maintain control and how women envision using men as a tool to gain agency. Furthermore, women’s subversive desires reach the surface of the text and threaten to bubble over the top. The political

ramifications of narratives that promise women that certain styles of masculinity are unsettling at best because, perhaps more than anything else, the texts stand as testaments to the fact that this promise, this desire, is anything but achievable.

“I’m not desperate; I’m organizing”: Acquiring the Male Accessory in *Maneater* and *Dating Without Novocain*

Janice Radway argued that the primary function of the romance novel was to assuage readers' fears that happiness and fulfillment may not be available when ascribing to traditional gender roles where men are protectors and providers and women are the protected and provided for. In a similar vein, Chick Lit validates women readers' doubts regarding societal norms of gendered behavior and reassures them that ways can be found to use men to their advantage. Radway also argued that the romance novel is both escapist *and* a way of protesting the promise of traditional gender roles. The same can be said of Chick Lit, in that the books present readers with a variety of styles of masculinity to show what the ideal fantasy man would look and act like—a project that is both escapist and a means of protesting the unavailability of such a man that society seems to promise women is available and consumable. The variety of styles of masculinity represented in the novels and what it often takes to create the “ultimate” man point to the very limited choices women really do have when it comes to men, as well as to the narrow expectations thrust upon men to conform to dominant styles of masculinity. Establishing women's complicity in this project validates women's desire for such an unachievable, ideal man, and, consequently, reinvigorates the patriarchal power system in affording certain kinds of men the right to represent “the man.” The man who wins the heroine's heart in the end is,

however, not the monolithic hero figure presented early on in the book, but rather an idealized figure who fulfills not only the traditional gendered expectations of provider and protector, but also recognizes the heroine's inner beauty and strengths and satisfies her in new ways sexually. He is, ultimately, a fantasized reconstruction that comes about as a result of women's search to find a man who not only emulates characteristics of dominant masculinity, but also acts as best friend, lover, confidant, and source of inspiration for the professional heroine in urban 21<sup>st</sup>-century America. This male figure reflects the tension women feel in their conflicting desires to both resist and ascribe to mainstream gender roles.

Before we get into a discussion of *Maneater* and *Dating Without Novocain* and how these two texts present men as accessories, I'd first like to discuss how the mainstream, alpha male is often conceived of in Chick Lit texts so that the reader has a clear idea of how alternative masculinities differ. White hegemonic masculinity is often represented in Chick Lit novels through one dominant male character who more often than not begins the novel as the heroine's love interest. The protagonist at the beginning of the story is also more prone to accepting mainstream understandings of masculinity and definitions of men as providers, protectors, and arbiters of strength and stability. As the novel develops, however, the heroine navigates man territory by either constantly trying to modify the looks and behavior of a male figure who doesn't quite fit the mold of [usually rich, handsome, white] husband<sup>14</sup>, or consistently and fallibly dating men who she believes fit this ideal, but who she soon discovers to be selfish, uncommunicative, or failing in some other regard.<sup>15</sup> Oftentimes Chick Lit novels begin with a heroine lamenting problems she is having with a present boyfriend or fiancé who currently defines a "man" for her but who is straying from the relationship for various reasons. This one-

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<sup>14</sup> See Clarissa in Gigi Grazer's *Maneater*

<sup>15</sup> See Lisa Cach's *Dating Without Novocain*, Valerie Frankel's *Accidental Virgin*, Cathy Yardley's *L.A. Woman*

dimensional male character weaves in and out of the narrative, serving the purpose of reminding the heroine that he, and his money, and all worldly things his money makes possible, is within her reach.

Cate, in *Always a Bridesmaid*, is a struggling Kindergarten teacher and her boyfriend Paul is a wealthy, well-traveled businessman who “never seemed to lose the suntan he got from surfing the Pacific Beach waves. [He] practically glowed next to the rumpled and exhausted-looking crowd of people on the sidewalk” (Lyles 43). Easily distinguishable as the wealthy and attractive alpha male, he represents at the beginning of the book the ideal man that the heroine is struggling to keep. Likewise, Sarah, in *L.A. Woman*, moves to L.A. with her rich salesman boyfriend Ben in tow hoping to find a job for herself and get him “that much closer to the altar,” only to find out that he has left her for another woman (Yardley 12). Sarah believes that Ben will support her in their expensive L.A. apartment until she nails down a job and can help pay rent. Both Clarissa in *Maneater* and Hannah in *Dating Without Novocain*, instead of having the physical man, have ideas of the perfect man and embark on quests to find him. In all cases, the novels begin with the heroine desiring the rich handsome man because of the lifestyle and security that he promises. The “rich, handsome” man in many ways represents the “hero” character many critics refer to when discussing “Mr. Right” in Chick Lit. When we track the development (or rather, lack of development) of this character, however, we discover that this model of the alpha male is ultimately pushed to the side as the heroine comes to new realizations about the role of men in her life.

A popular narrative device throughout all of Chick Lit is the use of lists, timelines, emails, blogs, or diary entries to communicate the desire to organize one's life. As Heather Hewett points out: “Frantic stream-of-consciousness lists” that describe pending (often domestic)

tasks that need to be done "revea[l] the frenzied breathlessness of [the heroine's] fragmented existence" ("You Are Not Alone," 123-24). Such lists communicate the stress heroines feel from negotiating demands in their professional and personal lives. In Gigi Grazer's *Maneater*, Clarissa's desire for a man stems from the desire to acquire money to support her current high class L.A. lifestyle (a lifestyle that her father has been supporting up to this moment). Raised on mantras of "Don't expect anything from anyone" and "Get everything you can," Clarissa's upbringing parodies postfeminism's stance that women have achieved it all (Grazer 88). When Clarissa reflects on her decision to find someone to marry who's rich instead of working herself toward a career that could reward her with money--a decision that she declares is the logical outcome of the advice her parents gave her--she pits the two extremes of an (over)professionalized life versus relying solely on men for money against each other. She declares her parents "groomed" her for reliance on men by telling her at age eighteen that she wasn't smart enough to become a doctor; instead, they encouraged her to "find a rich man" and to rely on her looks (Grazer 227). Because she cannot "sit alone in a room and study for years to become a doctor," Clarissa decides she has only the rich man avenue to pursue (Grazer 226). In conceptualizing women's success as having only two options: achieving an (over)professionalized career such as physician *or* marrying a rich man, Grazer pinpoints the reason for the search for the alpha male: to gain social and financial prestige.

Clarissa begins her manhunt with an idea of the ideal man she should acquire. On page three of the novel, we are introduced to Clarissa's New Year's "Man List," a tradition that she has been engaging in since the age of eighteen. The list includes the things she would "like to acquire" in the upcoming year much as other lists throughout Chick Lit itemize things to be done. She indicates the various men she'd like to get and notes what their current status is as well

as the level of difficulty that she anticipates in pursuing them. She writes: "Too old, married, children (ugh) . . . Level of difficulty: 8+. Prefers classy girls with exquisite taste" (Grazer 3). Her goal-oriented timeline, like so many other Chick Lit heroines in their late twenties/early thirties, is to be married (or engaged) to the perfect man ideally by the age of thirty. Clarissa's obsession with this perfect man quickly morphs him into an object that she desires to obtain. In the quest for Mr. Right, Chick Lit heroines become satisfied in acquiring physical markers that signify to other women and herself that she has achieved the next crucial step in fashioning femininity. Here the actual man matters very little; what matters more is that the heroine has a visible symbol that shows that she has accomplished the last vital step in achieving agency. Examples of physical markers include crafting wedding binders, purchasing wedding magazines, sewing the perfect wedding dress, and obtaining the engagement ring. Agency, it should be noted, doesn't necessarily mean marriage. Rather, the ring symbolizes that the heroine has all of her other ducks in a row. It is not so much the actual marriage that is important here; rather, the ring stands for conformity to society's values and adherence to the kind of list-like formats heroines follow. This, in turn, rewards the heroine with social prestige. Acquiring a man to marry is considered an achievement and the ring proves to other women that the heroine has not been wasting her time. The markers that heroines wish to acquire suggest the alluring quality of traditional prescriptions of femininity associated with domesticity and marriage. In Clarissa's case, she becomes so determined to find a rich, socially prestigious man that she actually projects this desire onto a man and has to shape him into the man she wants.

Clarissa's decision to construct her ideal man results in a realization that such a man is not possible. Aaron enters the picture as a rich potential when Clarissa discovers that he has the rights to an old musical worth \$1.5 million. This excites Clarissa so much that she exclaims: "I

adore old musicals" even though moments before she had confided to the reader that "Ugh. I hate old musicals" (Grazer 9). Clarissa then devotes herself to the tedious task of "homework" on Google to find out all she can about Aaron--his likes, dislikes, where she might find him, etc. (Grazer 16). Equipped with as much knowledge as she can muster up, including the fact that he appears to own a huge house, she arranges to meet him. Instantly looking him over "with the same speed and intensity she employ[s] as a hardline shopper at Barneys," she concludes that "his dress was prep school gone wrong . . . He wore no-name sunglasses with a shirt that was too big and a tie a pinch too small" (Grazer 19). She inspects Aaron the way she would a Prada handbag, deciding that his physical characteristics leave much to be desired. Deemed Aaron a project that can be "fixed," Clarissa happily declares that "with a tweak here, a fresh coat of paint there, and a good tweezing," the "new Mr. Alpert" could be made (Grazer 19). As she makes up endless lies about herself in an effort to attract him, she hosts her own engagement party and impregnates herself with a turkey baster full of Aaron's leftover sperm in order to get Aaron to commit. As the story progresses and it is revealed that this Aaron is different from the Aaron Clarissa thought she was pursuing--he is, it turns out, poor--Clarissa is forced to come to terms with her fantasy and the reality of her situation. Ultimately, Clarissa's quest for Mr. Right is plagued with disaster; it is shown to be impossible.

Hannah, in *Dating Without Novocain*, also does not have a boyfriend at the beginning of the book; instead, she has certain expectations that her ideal man will exhibit--terms she defines as "twenty-first century . . . standards of conduct to which a man should adhere" (Cach 234). The man should be a "reliable provider" as well as exhibit all elements of a good "package"—be in shape, be "clean and polite," expel any bad habits, and "be the strong one" (Cach 130 and 206). The qualities that she matter-of-factly attaches to Mr. Right at the beginning of the book feed the

traditional image of the ideal man who provides financial security and exhibits physical strength. Such a nod to traditional notions of white American masculinity early on in the text reaffirms the kind of man that the heroine should search for. However, as we see throughout these texts, this model image of the man is set up in the beginning only to be deconstructed and modified as the text goes on. The heroine undergoes a process by which she discovers she has other needs and desires when it comes to the role a man should play in her life and, as a result, often ends up rejecting the alpha male. As contemporary gender theorist Cynthia Enloe has noted, “Any group or institution becoming patriarchal is never automatic; it’s rarely self-perpetuating. It takes daily tending. It takes decisions—even if those are masked as merely following ‘tradition’” (245). This daily tending of American masculinity is evidenced in this text as styles of masculinity compete for the privilege of completing the heterosexual couple and satisfying the contemporary, urban professional woman. The ability of the heroine to accessorize her life with a male figure who offers her the most satisfaction in the end is, for her, empowering. While Chick Lit novels may seem to rehearse fairly traditional narratives of the woman choosing from among her suitors, the genre exposes how dominant masculinity represented by the alpha male is coming under attack and the ways in which it seeks to maintain power and the right to represent the normative amid both the heroine’s increasing presence as the one in control and alternative styles of masculinity that better fit the heroine’s changing needs.

A modest seamstress who has lofty visions of starting her own dress line, Hannah is financially needy, generally unhappy in her life, and seeking a Mr. Right to fulfill these deficiencies. In anticipation of her ticking biological clock, Hannah declares that finding Mr. Right by the time she’s 30 would give her “a sense of control” that is quickly fading because she does not have the other pieces of the puzzle that mark her as a “true” woman (Cach 28-9). She



declares: “I’ve got an independent career, I make my own hours and my own money, now I want a husband and to start a family” (Cach 29). Acquiring a husband for Chick heroines is the next logical step in a series of personal and professional accomplishments, a desire for the ultimate organization of their postmodern urban lifestyles. As Hannah puts it: “I’m not desperate . . . I’m organizing” (Cach 30). Acquiring Mr. Right is an empowering act of organizing for these women.

Going so far as to declare that her life won’t truly start until she has a guy, Hannah embarks on a quest to find a man to complete her, all the while eschewing Scott--the humble dentist whose sense of “honor” strikes Hannah as being an admirable quality for men. Scott is continually juxtaposed to the type of men he deems “assholes”--the men who cheat on their partners yet still seem to get all the women (Cach 233). The bulk of the book describes Hannah’s attempts to date men who she thinks could easily fit the bill of Mr. Right, all of whom miserably fail the test when examined more closely. These men include a smart and wealthy biologist who, with his clothes off, disappoints her with his soft flabby skin. Hannah describes him as an “elongated city marshmallow” instead of the “manly man” she was looking for. There is also a cop with a great body whose uniform turns her on but unfortunately has an erectile dysfunction; a guy who selfishly takes his condom off during sex when she had explicitly said to keep it on; and a wealthy computer engineer who lives in a big historic house, but whose careless cooking ultimately causes her to lose a tooth (Cach 97). After too many misadventures with men who meet the requirements of her “manly man” in the books but greatly disappoint in other ways, Hannah ends up accepting Scott—the more sensitive, caring, unambitious, and supportive man. In choosing Scott—whose sense of humor, congeniality, and level-headedness provide the perfect encouraging atmosphere to spur Hannah to develop her own dress line—Hannah both

constructs an image of the ideal man that is a composite of characteristics that the other men exhibit individually and, in doing this, simultaneously protests the idea that acquiring a man with all these attributes is feasible.

The small but growing field of feminist masculinity studies encourages critics to interrogate representations of masculinity that seek to maintain hegemonic power structures by appearing unchanging, transhistorical, or natural, when in reality they are “contingent, fluid, socially and historically constructed, changeable and constantly changing . . . and recreated through media representations and individual and collective performances” (Gardiner 11). By drawing attention to Hannah’s choice of Scott and the qualities that differentiate Scott from Hannah’s original male desire, Cach illustrates how styles of masculinity compete within the texts to establish the boundaries of manhood. In drawing attention to the inability of dominant masculinity to maintain control, Cach raises questions about how heroines are demanding more and different things from men and how men are expected to adapt to the role of emotional and professional supporter. Dominant masculinity here is anything but natural or unchanging; rather, it is shown to be under constant negotiation as Hannah understands that the fantasy of Mr. Right that she began with never really existed. By choosing Scott, Hannah defies expectations to seek out the most attractive, sexually fulfilling, wealthy man—the man who, at the beginning of the book, defines Mr. Right. Kaja Silverman explains that ideology functions to command belief in certain ‘dominant fictions,’ or things/ideas that we collectively take to be true. Because of its popularity among women and prolific representation in popular media and bookstores, Chick Lit has the power to create or reinforce a shared reality concerning the definition of manhood, but in these texts the concept of a stable, monolithic, traditional Mr. Right is fragmented, questioned, and modified. This ultimately points to tensions women are experiencing in being able to

conceptualize the male counterpart to a heterosexual relationship. The proliferation of styles of masculinity in these texts uncovers the artificiality of social regulations put on men to conform to a certain model that ultimately “produce[s] the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, The Reader 91). This natural masculine being is deconstructed in the texts as alternative versions of masculinity surface and women situate themselves as the ones in control of imagining alternatives--a process that calls into question whether any true essence of gender exists. While the overlooked man next door who turns out to be the heroine’s true love interest is a story that goes back centuries, Mr. Right is remade for the Chick Lit genre in interesting ways that reveal tensions surrounding masculinity and gender roles.

While Scott is not necessarily the strongest, manliest, or fittest man, he fulfills requirements that Hannah has because of her desire to retain some level of independence--a key marker of her postfeminist urban identity. As discussed in the previous chapter, Hannah’s ability to “choose” a man in this context is couched in the rhetoric of individualism and the tendency to relocate power and resistance in the body. Cach's treatment of masculinity in this text suggests that while the viability of dominant masculinity represented in Hannah’s early renderings of Mr. Right may be in question, the heroines still manage to affirm a newly fantasized style of white masculinity by the end of the text. The whole novel revolves around the search for the right kind of guy—one who deviates from traditional expectations of “the man” and encourages the professional woman to succeed. The elements of dominant masculinity retained in this new, more sensitive masculinity, point to an interest in maintaining understandings of men as providers and protectors—but in different key ways. Scott provides relief for Hannah’s tooth ache by giving her a shoulder to cry on and using a comforting voice that talks Hannah through her sexual misadventures with men. He is, in many ways, a new kind of man, who empathizes

with the overworked, independently driven, (over)professionalized, desiring modern woman.

This softer masculinity, more in tune with women's desires for intimacy in areas other than sexual fulfillment, presents a challenge to dominant masculinity's ability to represent the norm. While book covers focus on selling sex as the marker of the genre, in the end the heroine chooses someone more akin to Hannah's Scott. While these women feel empowered by their choice, and while being able to choose in this manner appeals to readers plagued by similar feelings of doubt regarding the ability of mainstream notions of masculinity to satisfy a modern, professional woman's desires, the novel also presents itself as somewhat of a fantasy. By promising women that they can find the kind of man who best meets their changing needs and desires, the book elides discussion of those women unable to make these kinds of choices. The idea that women are somehow able to dictate the norms of masculinity that most benefit their lived realities provides for many a false sense of empowerment. True empowerment is achieved by validating women's desire to search for other satisfying relationships with men and to suggest (however implicitly) that current definitions of masculinity do not suffice. One of the reasons that Chick Lit is so successful is because it appeals to readers' desire to resist.

Rather than presenting men as one-dimensional figures, *Novocain* reveals the tension that currently surrounds how styles of masculinity are competing to represent the normative and, subsequently, the inability of current definitions of dominant masculinity to meet the needs of contemporary professional women.<sup>16</sup> Rather than desiring the alpha male, Hannah ends up choosing the less attractive, less wealthy, less sophisticated man who exhibits the down-to-earth sensibilities that will allow her to retain her independence. As Judith Butler contends, the ability to envision alternatives to current dominant systems of gender regulation is essential for

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<sup>16</sup> See Stephanie Harzewski's 2006 dissertation entitled "The New Novel of Manners: 'Chick Lit' and the Urban Code Heroine" for a discussion of the role of one-dimensional male characters.

challenging notions of stable, original gender categories. *Novocain* illustrates how masculinity is performed and shaped by constraints set by women and, as such, opens up and blurs binary gender boundaries usually associated with masculinity and femininity. Butler argues that maintaining clear definitions of masculinity and femininity is essential to policing the genders and controlling expressions of gender. In *Novocain*, the qualities that define masculinity are complicated and shown to be adaptable and open to interpretation; they illustrate the potential of proliferation within the realm of what is recognized as intelligible that Butler insists is necessary to empowerment.

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler argues:

It is important not only to understand how the terms of gender are instituted, naturalized, and established as presuppositional but to trace the moments where the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, where the coherence of the categories are put into question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformable. (216)

I do not mean to imply that Hannah is necessarily empowered in a Butlerian sense in the novel or that women reading these books will be able to mimic her behavior, make these kinds of choices, and achieve agency. I do, however, find it empowering that the book illustrates different models of masculinity and reveals the tensions inherent in dominant masculinity's inability to maintain control amid shifting expectations of gender roles. So while overall the narrative rehearses heterosexual coupledness, the categories of what defines a man have been put into question and, in doing this, the text achieves value in suggesting that the limits of gender identity can be expanded and modified. Additionally, the book complicates women's desires by showing that they are anything but satisfied with mainstream definitions of masculinity; instead, they reveal

great anxiety over what a man's role should be in their active search for new definitions of masculinity.

### Re-Conceptualizing Masculinity in the Realm of Friendship

Cathy Yardley's *L.A. Woman* further complicates how dominant masculinity struggles to maintain the right to represent the normative amid alternative styles of masculinity that more aptly appeal to women's desires. In this case, the fulfilling relationship lies outside the realm of the sexual; instead, the ideal male partner is one who fulfills the heroine's need for friendship. Such a re-conceptualization of masculinity is telling in the ways that it challenges traditionally valued qualities ascribed to dominant masculinity, such as the ability to provide financial support and fulfillment in marriage. In offering to the reader a relationship built upon friendship, the book presents a more plausible alternative to the demands traditional unions of marriage and, alternately, promiscuous sexual desire, place on women. The book can be read as another method of negotiating masculinity, although this time it is the man's ability to be a friend that the heroine most desires and honors. This portrayal of masculinity upsets the ability for dominant masculinity--with its focus on providing and protecting in a patriarchal and paternalistic sense--to satisfy the changing demands of professional women.

Similar to the beginning of *Novocain*, *L.A. Woman* opens with a description of Sarah's relationship with Ben to illustrate for the reader Sarah's understanding of the ultimate man. Sarah comes to L.A. from northern California with dreams of landing a well-paying and satisfying career. For much of the book, Sarah continues to wait for the wealthy and successful businessman who originally accompanied her to L.A.—Benjamin—a man described by her

sensible and seemingly happily married (see Chapter Two) friend as: “solidity and stability and purpose. Benjamin was permanent” (Yardley 124). Throughout the book, Benjamin is presented as the model man in terms of his ability to provide, but is otherwise villainized by other male characters in the text as “the asshole” because of how he treats women. If Sarah chooses Ben, her life will be financially stable and very predictable; she notes several times that with Ben, she has direction. After Ben’s fling with another woman fails and he realizes Sarah would make a good wife—because she would remain loyal to him—he begs Sarah to marry him. Sarah is so overwhelmed with this alluring promise of domesticity and traditional gender relations whereby she could rely on Ben financially, that she initially accepts his proposal and vows to leave a promising job. Ben knows that his financial security allures Sarah; he tells her: “You wouldn’t have to get a job. You wouldn’t have to do anything. You’d live with me” (Yardley 340). While Ben’s promise of financial stability is Sarah’s original definition of manhood at the beginning of the novel, this representation of dominant masculinity is broken down over the course of the novel, allowing for alternative styles of masculinity to surface that more closely fill the needs of our heroine.

Yardley effectively juxtaposes the characters of Ben and Kit—who represent contrasting styles of masculinity—to suggest that the two styles are in competition for the right to represent the normative. Sally Robinson, in her study on white masculinity entitled *Marked Men*, asserts: “the power to represent the normative must be constantly rewon” (4). In order for dominant masculinity to maintain its privilege and continue as the “dominant fiction” Silverman discusses, it must not only effectively present itself as natural and stable, but it also must constantly be re-imagined and rewon in the popular imaginary. Yardley downplays the significance of Ben by focusing on his inability to fulfill the heroine’s needs that arise from desires to maintain an

empowered, urban, professional identity. Instead, it is Kit who ultimately attracts Sarah and takes center stage as the primary male character. By restoring an attractive style of masculinity in the peripheral male character, Yardley unsettles the project of circulating the dominant image of masculinity. First described by Sarah as “just a friend . . . a relatively good-looking, relatively funny guy,” it is Kit who questions Sarah about who exactly she is trying to become and what she is trying to prove by accepting Martika’s plea to “make her over” (Yardley 261). Kit represents a caring man honestly concerned with Sarah’s wellbeing; he serves as Sarah’s conscience when he questions her as to why she wants to change her physical appearance. Furthermore, he villainizes Ben’s style of masculinity and classifies him as someone who acts like an “asshole” just so he can “get [some] in this town” (Yardley 262). Kit’s character undermines dominant masculinity by pointing out its unattractive qualities. In attacking the true nature of men like Ben, Kit presents himself as a more honest and caring character who both invites the reader’s trust and stands as the alternative man of choice for the heroine. Men like Ben represent the wounded white males Robinson discusses--who organize around perceived losses of power in the changing 21<sup>st</sup> century urban landscape and can serve as a “symbol for the decline of the American way” (Robinson 2). The process of remasculinization Yardley envisions here is one that complicates understandings of masculinity by revealing women as the ones re-conceptualizing masculinity to fit their needs. Rather than a process of remasculinization that shores up dominant masculinity, *L.A. Woman* portrays alternative forms of masculinity that resist dominant fictions of masculinity and point to its shortcomings.

In her search for the man who will meet her needs, Sarah is influenced by her new friends and undergoes a physical makeover that spurs a makeover of her desires. While first under Martika's influence, Sarah attempts to follow her model of sexually promiscuous behavior with



the belief that it can be empowering. At one point Sarah declares that she wants “a guy who could truly make her sexually happy,” a desire that leads her to have sex with a married man named Jeremy (Yardley 239). Jeremy, though married, is both very attractive and extremely wealthy; he also makes himself very available sexually, leading Sarah to describe him as “imminently fuckable and, conversely, easy to walk away from” (Yardley 261). Jeremy’s character is a caricature of two of the qualities commonly associated with dominant masculinity as perceived in the popular imaginary—attractive and wealthy—both of which prove to be completely unfulfilling and superficial. Jeremy is “so damned sexy” because he provides an opportunity for Sarah to experiment with the sexual needs she perceives that she has (Yardley 261). But it is Kit, who lovingly takes care of her after someone slips something in her drink, who comes to represent the valued man.

Kit’s inquiries as to why she is going to such desperate measures to change herself and become like Martika lead Sarah to snap back at him: “I don’t need a keeper . . . Mr. Clint-Eastwood-Substitute” (Yardley 320). Playing the role of a concerned protector with Sarah’s best intentions at heart, Kit’s function here is far deeper than Ben’s promise to Sarah that he would take care of her if she would accept him back. While Sarah first understands Kit’s concern to be that of the stereotypical male protector variety, she, as well as the reader, comes to the understanding that his intentions are honest, warm, and true. Kit’s deviance from the corporate path that so often defines alpha males and equips them with monetary success is what attracts Sarah. Kit’s confession of how he quit his PhD program because he realized he was “on a path that was wrong for me,” and instead found contentment in writing and working in a coffee shop, appeals to her because she has a similar interest in finding her own way in a world dominated by mainstream expectations and social dictums (Yardley 326). Her professional desire to resist

unfulfilling jobs is coupled with a personal desire to find a man who dares to step outside the lines of what defines a successful man. This interest in eliding established norms professionally and personally is what draws the two together.

Far more introspective and philosophical in nature, Kit stands out as a male character in a Chick Lit novel when he poses questions to Sarah that cause her to really think about who she is and why she's doing the things she's doing. He asks her: "Sarah, what are you so afraid of? . . . When I first met you, I thought you were the most afraid person I'd ever seen in my life . . . It's like you're constantly trying to get it right, have an answer, have a plan" (Yardley 321). Truly worried about Sarah's impending transformation and quest to embody feminine behaviors attributed to dominant codes of white beauty, Kit expresses his genuine concern with Sarah's happiness. By the end of the book, Kit has clearly influenced Sarah to think more about what she wants out of life. Thanks to Kit's encouragement, she decides to take a promising job that will reward her interests and abilities and rejects Ben and his model of masculinity. Even though Sarah and Kit have shared some intimate nights together, Kit accepts Sarah's plea to remain friends for now and the novel closes with the image of him patting her shoulder and the two walking off together. Sarah warns Kit: "I just got over a guy. I don't need to walk into another mess just like it. I've finally got a job, [and] a roommate situation that doesn't look like it's going to completely explode on me" (Yardley 284). The story ends with the image of Sarah full of promise and hope with Kit by her side as her supporter and friend.

At the end of *L.A. Woman*, Sarah has the choice of accepting Ben, marrying him, and moving with him to Northern California where he would take care of her in the very traditional sense of the ultimate masculine protector. As Ben represents the more traditional white male, her decision to forego this life indicates a refusal to accept the current definitions of dominant

masculinity and a desire to seek out other qualities in men that might be compelling and useful to maintaining her urban professional identity. This desire to reject traditional codes of masculinity and seek out alternative styles that satisfy in new ways is arguably a universal desire that could extend to many women. Her decision to remain in L.A. and stay connected to Kit is motivated by a desire to retain independence and agency as well as maintain a relationship with a man. The promises of marriage and domesticity offered by Ben do not entice Sarah, as they carry with them inherent threats of loss of identity and an inability to exert control over her life. This novel points to how in flux styles of masculinity are and how alternative versions of masculinity are sizing up dominant masculinity's ability to remain the mainstream image of masculinity. For the process of dominant white masculinity to be successful, Judith Gardiner contends that the nostalgic search for "an ideal form located in a past" that is "always missing, lost, or about to be lost" must be underway (10). Because masculinity is an historical, dynamic, and political process that seeks and persuades coercion from the masses, for dominant masculinity to be successful in maintaining normalcy and stability it must be constantly re-negotiated. *L.A. Woman* upsets the ability for dominant white masculinity to remain unmarked and to present itself as stable and natural. Yardley suggests that this ability to assert the normative is under fire and, moreover, that it is impossible given women's desires to participate in the construction of the definition of masculinity.

Of course, the ending, while happy and satisfying for the general reader, leaves us thinking about the real social problems that prevent most women from making the kind of choices Sarah does. The desire to have a say in how men enter into women's lives, what roles they play, how they can best be supportive to the working woman, and best meet the needs of women determined to fill emotional voids created by 21<sup>st</sup> century urban American society

simmers under the surface and is never fully resolved.

“A bad case of the homophobic blues”: Re-Masculinizing the Alpha Male

*Dating Without Novocain* and *L.A. Woman* both provide examples of texts that complicate and resist the naturalness of dominant masculinity to fulfill women’s desires for companionship. These texts open up discussion regarding the portrayal of masculinity within Chick Lit by highlighting how alternative models of masculinity can point to the faults of dominant masculinity in its attempt to maintain powerful hegemonic ideologies that assume the ability to protect and provide for the needy female counterpart. The process of remasculinization that occurs as a result of upsetting dominant masculinity concludes with heroines seeking and accepting more fulfilling relationships with men who can comfort, encourage, and accommodate the heroine’s quest for self-hood and professional identity. The other Chick Lit text I’ll discuss here, however, presents alternative forms of masculinity in a very different way. As hegemonic masculinity is always in search of verification and authentication, it requires the policing of alternative masculinities as a method to naturalize the dominant white male body. This chapter will look at the dangers of policing alternative masculinities in this way and it will examine what such treatment of alternative masculinity reveals about the tensions and insecurities regarding gender relations exhibited in the book. Whereas Cach’s and Yardley’s male characters serve to undermine and unsettle hegemonic masculinity, it is equally important to pay attention to the Chick Lit texts that represent alternative masculinities—often metrosexual and homosexual—as unviable, excessively feminine, or insufficient models. Some novels, such as Wendy Markham’s *Slightly Engaged*, privilege dominant masculinity in the end and suggest that wealthy, powerful

white men need only learn how to incorporate qualities exhibited by alternative styles of masculinity.

Markham's *Slightly Engaged* portrays three alternative styles of masculinity that embody different ideal characteristics of masculinity and serve to inform Jack's expression of manhood. The characteristics exhibited by the alternative masculinities are attractive to and privileged by the heroine, but they occupy the wrong bodies. The book is an attempt on the part of the heroine to communicate to the alpha male which aspects of these alternative masculinities he should adopt and which he should avoid. When these characteristics manifest in the correct white male body, the ideal man is made. Such a narrative supports a style of remasculinization that privileges mainstream expressions of masculinity and more traditional gender relations. Robinson asserts that white men as a social group responded to perceived threats of loss of power brought on by feminist and minority concerns in post-1960s America and that they reflected these tensions by producing "images of a physically wounded and emotionally traumatized white masculinity" in popular men's texts such as John Updike's *Rabbit* books, Michael Chrichton's *Disclosure*, Stephen King's *Misery*, and James Dickey's *Deliverance* (6). As such, the "personally, individually targeted" white man has come to stand for the "emblem of the current crisis in white masculinity" (Robinson 5). This effort to draw attention to the decentering of dominant white masculinity is done in such a way as to garner sympathy from readers and viewers and to provoke readers to see this decentering as a negative act.

Many (male) researchers within the field of men's studies from the 1980s through today have offered empirical data on white masculinity 'in crisis,' arguing that "the *forced* visibility of the white and male norm" brought about by feminist and minority activism has negatively impacted the white male's abilities to be successful in school, family life, work, and health

(Robinson 55).<sup>17</sup> Amid such regressive tactics to center white men's concerns, Robinson's argument is compelling; the fact that white masculinity today is representing itself as 'in crisis' and literature, media, and political outlets are all actively involved in the process of reasserting visions and rhetoric of normative masculinity—what is often termed “remasculinization”—gives us cause for concern.<sup>18</sup> Such heavy involvement from multiple arenas in the project of naturalizing a normative white masculinity is significant not only because it affirms the notion that masculinity truly is a historical and political construct, but also because it draws attention to white masculinity as occupying a very tenuous (and valued) position within American culture today. Both the announcements of crisis made clear by the texts and films Robinson studies *and* the engagement of several popular vehicles of myth and meaning-making with efforts to modify, amend, and renegotiate white masculinity prove society's deep concern with “something [that] has been lost in American culture, something [that] has been displaced, decentered, and generally pushed to the margins by a host of competing forces and trends in social, cultural, and political life” (Robinson 43). It is, in effect, very important political work to communicate images and understandings of normative masculinity, as such images work to maintain traditional gender relations in the popular imaginary and affirm dominant power structures. *Slightly Engaged*, in its method of drawing attention to multiple styles of masculinity, can be seen as one of these popular outlets involved in confirming a dominant white masculinity “in crisis” and affirming

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<sup>17</sup> See Tim Edwards' *Cultures of Masculinity* for an overview of the kinds of studies conducted in the quest to find white masculinity indeed 'in crisis.' See also William Bennett's 1984 report on the state of higher education (Robinson 54). Edwards also discusses the various ways in which white men have been engaged in the task of 'fighting back' or reclaiming manhood in response to such perceived losses of power through literature and the media.

<sup>18</sup> Edwards discusses the rise of New Man and New Lad men's magazines and argues that their function is to affirm privileged white masculinity. He also discusses the rise in the 1990s of men's books that call for a 'back to basics' approach to reclaiming masculinity, citing Robert Bly and Warren Farrell's work. He effectively draws attention to the way mediated masculinities are functioning in American society to commodify and sell certain versions of

certain styles of white masculinity for mainstream America. By repudiating homo- and metro-sexual styles of masculinity, and distinguishing the alpha male figure from these styles, dominant masculinity is naturalized in the narrative.

The lead male character Jack in many ways represents the wounded white male Robinson discusses as emblematic of the current crisis of white masculinity. He is, of course, not physically wounded. Rather, he exhibits emotional trauma as he constantly screws up and fails to accommodate the dominant model of masculinity that Tracy so desperately wants him to embody. In effect, he cannot keep up with the new expectations set by women negotiating modern realities in professional work worlds. Men like Jack have lost a sense of how they should be performing masculinity and it is their ability to remasculinize--to figure out how to be a man--that affords the happy and satisfying ending for the reader. In emphasizing this sense of confusion regarding gender roles, men such as Jack who currently represent dominant masculinity in this space, claim victim status as a result of being “personally, individually targeted” by expectations associated with feminism (Robinson 6). According to Robinson, the emphasis on actual bodily trauma as a result of coming to terms with their privileged status effectively works to substitute the body for the political and the individual for the social. The outcome of representing dominant masculinity as “in crisis” in this novel is the emergence of a model of remasculinization whereby Jack must prove he is worthy of the heroine’s sustained interest by subsequently adopting some characteristics of masculinity and refraining from others as presented in the other male characters of Mike, Raphael, and Will.

Jack’s often humorous and at times pathetic confusion regarding his role as a man is shown in the beginning of the novel when he expresses angst at attending a friend’s wedding.

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masculinity. See also Brenton Malin’s *American Masculinity Under Clinton* for discussion of ways in which the 1990s ‘crisis’ in masculinity was negotiated in politics and the media to affect elections and ratings.

His lack of understanding the traditional conventions that surround engagement and marriage stand in direct contrast to Tracy's over-the-top expectations and dreams of perfect monogamy. His off-the-cuff comment that marriage is an "asinine" act disturbs our heroine Tracy, whose sole purpose throughout the book is to find "evidence" that Jack's and her relationship will indeed become "permanent" and evolve into marriage (Markham 10-11). Tracy, an account manager at an advertising company, describes Jack as a "clutterholic, marriagephobic" man with whom she probably has a "non-future" (Markham 35). Tracy gets chills by thinking how they live together, stating: "Funny how even after seventeen months of living with somebody, you still get a little thrill over the mundane daily reminders of domestic coupledness. At least, I still do" (14). In response to Jack's quip about marriage being "asinine" and his reluctance to attend the friend's wedding, Tracy replies: "How romantic is it to stand up in front of everyone you even knew and vow to be with one person all the days of your life?" (17) While Tracy's obsession over being at "Phase One," where "Phase Two" is marriage and "Phase Three" is the baby carriage, the man she seems to want out of Jack is the one Clarissa and Hannah were also in search of at the beginning of *Maneater* and *Dating Without Novocain*. The difference here is that this ideal man is actually realized in the plot of *Slightly Engaged*. Jack's edgy behavior that begins the book continues when he exhibits discomfort around Tracy's gay friend Raphael and shows general uneasiness and nervousness regarding his role in the engagement process.

The plot of the novel revolves around Tracy waiting for Jack to propose to her, and the anxious lapse of time leaves Tracy longing for any bit of evidence lurking around any corner that may indicate he is about to pop the question. As Jack continues to disappoint Tracy at every holiday and good opportunity to propose, she loses sight of other things that she should concern herself with, including working toward a promotion and caring about anything going on in the



world. She recognizes the inherent problems with focusing all of her energy on this man, repeating to herself several times throughout the novel: “I am *not* one of those so-called New York career women whose secret main goal in life is a diamond ring on her finger and wedding date on the calendar” so as to convince herself of its truth (Markham 55). However, her constant obsession with Jack’s pending proposal consumes her life as he continues to fail at romance and fumble at opportunities to impress her. He expresses feelings of disinterest in marriage, doesn’t know the meaning of Sweetest Day, and keeps on getting everything wrong. He can’t wear the right clothes, pick the right restaurant, think of a creative way to propose, or work up the nerve to propose. When he suggests that they have a quiet night at home watching *Willy Wonka*, Tracy reveals her frustration when she confesses to her reader: “*That’s* what I need? Is he *high*?” (Markham 63). His idea of slipping into some jeans to get dinner on Sweetest Day is met with equal hostility as Tracy declares: “[he] has apparently set his sights on the kind of establishment that offers a denim dress code and a tuna-melt special” (Markham 62). Time after time, Jack fails to live up to Tracy’s standards of what makes a man, and this all occurs alongside Tracy’s interactions with different men who all in some way comment on Jack’s style of masculinity, offering up qualities that should be emulated or avoided. As in most Chick Lit texts, the heroine feels her biological clock ticking and desires that ultimate man to complete her urban profile. Marriage is the next logical step for her—as she sees it—and Jack’s fumbling of all the right moves that communicate adherence to this traditional trajectory of heterosexual love frustrates her.

The function of alternative representations of masculinity is important in that it provides hegemonic masculinity with a clear distinction of what *it is not* in order to reinforce normative versions of masculinity. As Judith Butler contends throughout her work, societal regulations, in

order to maintain the structural powers that result from endorsing traditional norms of gender, must clarify distinction between masculine and feminine, between hetero- and homo- sexual, so as to keep genders easily distinguishable, identifiable, and controllable. In other words, for dominant masculinity to retain the right to represent the normative, it is imperative that there are other, alternative, and marginalized forms of masculinity present to shore up understandings of dominant masculinity. According to Butler, one only assumes one's gender by repudiating homosexual attachments (Butler, The Reader 248). She asserts: "Heterosexuality naturalizes itself by insisting on the radical otherness of homosexuality" (Butler, The Reader 250). I look here at how these alternative masculinities are policed in this text to confirm the valued status of hegemonic, mainstream masculinity.

Raphael is an example of the stereotypical gay friend found in many Chick Lit novels. Usually this male character is overly feminized and serves as the heroine's friend, confidant, and source of inside knowledge on men. Tracy introduces him as "a wisecracking male fashionista" who sleeps in the nude, runs spicy personal ads, and has a nose "even more discriminating about scents—good and bad—than he is about fashion" (Markham 48-50). Described as the ultra feminine stereotypical gay man obsessed with style and consumption, Raphael has a "conversational style liberally sprinkled with exclamation points," adores "girltalk," and loves to shop (Markham 51-2). Jack's response to and treatment of Raphael is especially telling, I believe, in demarcating lines of acceptable and unacceptable expressions of masculinity. When Tracy asks Jack to change into something nicer for when Raphael comes over, Jack immediately retorts that this impinges on his heterosexuality. He insists that his choice of sweats, rather than dressing in nicer clothes, communicates his heterosexuality—something very important to him. He responds to her plea with: "What's wrong with sweats? . . . Too comfortable? Too hetero? . . .

You want me to dig out my feather boa and hot pants so he and I can be twins?” (Markham 48-9). Jack aims to paint a very clear line between hetero- and homo-sexuality so as to shore up his own expression of heterosexuality and highlight Raphael’s wardrobe as “gay.” Jack makes a big deal of wearing the sweats and believes he can physically mark his heterosexuality. He goes on to quickly distance himself from Raphael when he describes him as a “horny queen who thinks every single guy in New York is secretly closeted” and relays the story of Raphael’s lap dance for one of his friends (Markham 49). Jack’s intention while saying these things about Raphael is to elicit humor from the listener. He employs humor in this manner many times throughout the text when he discusses Raphael to shore up his own masculinity and mark Raphael’s as merely a humorous act. By marking Raphael’s masculinity as “other” and ascribing notions of humor and outlandish behavior to it, he effectively distances himself from homosexuality and reinforces definitions of the model man as heterosexual. As Jack aims to elucidate the distinction between masculine and non-masculine, his actions draw attention to how idealized forms of gender are reproduced and nonnormative expressions of gender are alienated. In suggesting that Raphael merely “acts” like a gay guy--that it’s something any man could do by simply putting on a feather boa—echoes conservative definitions of homosexuality as merely a “lifestyle choice.” Jack’s comments about Raphael’s outlandish gay persona suggest his deep-seated homophobia and his intention to use clothing to distinguish his heterosexuality.

While Jack’s policing of the alternative masculinity presented by Raphael is intended to mark his style of masculinity as dominant and true by marking Raphael’s as ridiculous and outlandish, it is Raphael who understands the meaning of Sweetest Day and in other ways exhibits sensitivity to things and issues Tracy holds dear. It is, after all, Raphael’s proposal to Donatello on Sweetest Day and their Valentine’s Day wedding ceremony near the end of the

novel that provoke the most jealousy and tension in a heroine who wishes more than anything that her lover would ascribe to the traditional expressions of love that these commercialized holidays suggest. The fact that Sweetest Day is chosen to represent the day when love should be expressed is telling in that this manufactured holiday, as well as Valentine's Day, survives primarily because of its commercial success in selling love. These two dates underscore the kind of artificial quest Tracy is on to find some kind of ideal, perfect love. Like these two holidays, Tracy's image of the perfect man must be completely manufactured as well. Naming the two gay men Raphael and Donatello after gay Renaissance painters furthers an image of the men as archaic and unique—in other words, not your everyday, traditional kind of guy. The fact that, in this novel, it is the over-the-top gay male who understands commercialized romance and is able to communicate and display romantic affection toward his partner suggests that “regular” men like Jack are failing to meet the needs of women like Tracy, and that such a search is indeed no more than a fantasy.

Later in the novel, when Jack and Tracy vacation in the Caribbean—a trip Tracy initially thought would celebrate their engagement—Tracy hits it off with another gay couple who respond to knowledge of Raphael's Valentine's Day wedding with: “Oh-my-God-that-is-so-romantic!” (Markham 279). Sexual energy abounds as Gregory and Daniel flirt like crazy and contemplate requesting “Let's Get Drunk and Screw” from the guitar man. When Tracy suggests they all get together back in Manhattan sometime, Jack kicks her under the table and tries to come up with excuses as to why they can't. The reader senses Jack's discomfort with this gay couple as they openly flaunt their sexual attraction to each other and he distances himself physically from them. Such a romantic scene unnerves Jack, who immediately feels uncomfortable and nervous in their company, prompting Daniel to respond: “I think somebody's

got a bad case of the homophobic blues” (Markham 280). Gay couples serve the purpose in the novel to both threaten Jack’s masculinity and provide an opportunity for Jack to set his masculinity apart from theirs. Even while he tries to do this, however, it becomes clear that Tracy values aspects embodied in the gay men’s treatment of each other that Jack is ultimately expected to adopt. Jack is not complete until he can express the kind of romantic feelings that the gay couples express. Interestingly, the gay couples, although they possess the ability to express love in the traditional ways that Tracy values, are still marginalized because the love is not being expressed between a man and a woman. In this way, the novel rehearses traditional dominant expressions of love between a man and woman by distinguishing homosexuality as a union that has redeemable qualities, but only when they are adopted in heterosexual union.

It is not until Jack can express love in this way toward Tracy that the book is complete. Her jealousy toward Raphael and Donatello’s loving relationship is expressed in thoughts left to only her and the reader, such as when she confesses: “[I’m] sick to death of hearing about their Valentine’s Day wedding and their safari honeymoon and living happily ever *bla, bla, bla*” (Markham 194). Ironically, this is *exactly* what Tracy wants for Jack and herself. While Jack accentuates his masculinity by poking fun at how Raphael ascribes to traditionally feminine interests, Raphael’s adherence to the traditional expressions of love that Tracy deems pivotal in meeting the demands of professional urban women elevates his style of masculinity in women’s eyes. It is this ability to embrace the significance of proposing and marriage that Tracy hopes Jack will understand and act on. Although Raphael is portrayed as romantic, caring, and in touch with his feelings and emotions--all things dominant masculinity needs to adopt--Tracy uses derogative language when she refers to him as “a flaming homo,” thus delegating his overall performance of masculinity to the rungs of the marginalized. Women are enchanted by these

qualities, but they are not fully realized until they exude from the dominant, white heterosexual body of Jack.

The disturbing representation of gay masculinity in this text points to the intense political and ideological interest to confine it to the feminine realm so that it will not threaten dominant heterosexual masculinity. Both Jack and Tracy ultimately mark Raphael with demeaning and stereotypical characteristics of gay men that serve to draw a fine line between acceptable models of masculinity and anything “Other.” Such a treatment keeps gay masculinity unrealized as a viable alternative to expressions of dominant masculinity--in effect, preventing the reader from realizing that this alternative model, which fails to conform to gender norms, results in a demarcation of the legitimate and illegitimate forms of male expression. When Butler stresses that coherence is desired—that a natural and uniform expression of gender is needed to maintain societal regulations and popular renderings of gender—she further stresses that mainstream society has a profound interest in keeping the body “bounded and constituted by the markers of sex” so that the definitions of masculinity and femininity are easily identifiable and, therefore, policed (Butler, *The Reader* 103). Keeping Raphael’s style of masculinity clearly within the confines of feminine expressions of homosexuality prevents it from achieving status as a legitimate expression of masculinity. Such policing keeps the focus of “real” masculinity on Jack.

Tracy’s ex-boyfriend Will represents another alternative style of masculinity whose expression of manliness is policed for the purpose of pointing to his shortcomings and shoring up Jack’s dominant masculinity. Although Tracy believes in Will’s heterosexuality--confessing to the reader that “I slept with him for three years and can attest that not every good-looking, cologne-and-couture-wearing, narcissistic actor is gay”--she is tempted to ascribe to the belief

shared by many of her friends that maybe he is gay because it “could make his lack of interest in [Tracy] easier to bear” (Markham 72). Will, the “self-obsessed drama queen,” that Tracy calls “a flaming metrosexual” failed her in their previous relationship by never proposing and focusing only on his needs (Markham 72). Tracy here differentiates heterosexual from gay as the ability to propose and engage in other acts that confirm traditional methods of commitment. Feeling that she has to confirm his success and greatness, Tracy partakes in Will-initiated phone conversations, only to learn time and again how obsessed Will is with his looks, career, clothes, etc. Feigning interest in Will’s life ultimately makes Tracy feel “empowered” because it reminds her of what a loser he is and how great Jack is (Markham 81). Again, Will’s absorption in his career, as well as his attention to his dress, are villainized here as a style of masculinity that oddly combines accusations of traditional expressions of masculinity (the provider) and a feminine attention to detail. Tracy’s biggest complaint against Will, of course, is that he never made an effort to make their relationship more permanent, despite her patient wait. Tracy’s frequent interactions with Will throughout the book serve to remind her, as well as the reader, of the qualities not desired in a man—self-absorption in his career and an obsession over his looks. These qualities are perhaps exaggerated in Will’s character—one indeed being an exaggeration of masculinity and the other of femininity—to distinguish again this alternative masculinity from the desired dominant masculinity embodied in Jack’s character.

Another character named Mike textures the novel as the “puppy-like” character duped into marriage by a demanding girlfriend who insisted on a ring and wedding date in exchange for moving in with him (Markham 23). As Tracy’s boss who got laid off a month ago, Mike lacks the skills to write a resume and move on, and so he pathetically remains at the office pretending to have a job. Tracy notes that Mike “makes Jessica Simpson look like an intellectual” because

he holds a position over her but can't compose simple documents (Markham 83). Ultimately, Mike plays the role of a man who is both dominated by his woman in his personal life and dominated by higher-ups in the workplace as he is unrecognized and unsuccessful in his career. When Tracy thinks of what an unaccomplished pushover he is, she instantly reminds herself of how she needs to take control of her life (Markham 84). Will and Mike both provide portrayals of alternate styles of masculinity that exhibit characteristics unattractive to Tracy. Similar to how Raphael and Donatello (as well as Gregory and Danial) are too intensely gay, Will and Mike exhibit extreme qualities usually associated with masculine behavior. Presenting male characters that serve to define for the reader (and Tracy) what qualities are undesirable in men, Jack, in the end, is the best choice for a mate. Markham includes these men in her novel to shore up Jack's style of masculinity and to draw attention to the various contesting styles that impact Jack's ability to successfully navigate man terrain.

While the novel seems to revolve around Tracy's tense wait for Jack to propose and confirm that traditional avenues to marriage provide a woman with ultimate happiness and fulfillment--enticing the reader to empathize with Tracy and eagerly await Jack's proposal and promise of domestic bliss--the book can also be read as Jack's quest to achieve dominant masculinity amid contesting alternative versions of masculinity. The alternative masculinities represented by Raphael, Will, and Mike serve to shore up understandings of dominant masculinity as aspects present in these alternative styles which are attractive but are in the wrong bodies. The characters of Raphael, Will, and Mike also point to the performative and constructed nature of dominant masculinity, as Jack, in order to prove his masculinity to Tracy to keep her, has to learn which characteristics to adopt and which to discard. At the end of the book, when Jack clumsily proposes to Tracy in the street on their way home from Raphael's wedding in



response to her direct questioning on the issue of marriage, he confesses he's been trying to find the perfect moment to propose. Such a declaration that exposes romantic thoughtfulness is enough for Tracy to confirm that "some things really are perfect after all" and the book closes with the ideal movie-like image of Jack lifting Tracy out of her shoes and into the air to celebrate their love and, arguably, his newfound masculinity (Markham 323). His adoption of traditional expressions of heterosexual love (the proposal) proves his masculinity.

Representing dominant masculinity in this way provides the reader with the fantasy that such an ideal man that encompasses all of the necessary qualities associated with traditional masculinity is achievable after all. This portrayal of masculinity suggests the very unachievable and unlikely nature of acquiring such a man even as it encourages such a quest for our heroine. In this way, the novel endorses a fantasy-like preoccupation with piecing together the perfect man from bits and pieces present in alternative expressions of masculinity. Such a project on the one hand serves to reassure readers that the picture-perfect man glorified in popular media outlets is possible. On the other hand, Markham illustrates how the white male "victim" who can't quite get it right, who doesn't quite yet embody dominant masculinity, can negotiate the right to represent dominant masculinity.

Chapter Three examined the dynamics of how diverse models of masculinity play out against each other in the Chick Lit genre. While the narratives overall seek closure and happy endings that satisfy the reader with their own doubts regarding the role of men in contemporary society, it is the internal pressures that the narratives create--the desires that are never resolved--that offer methods of resistance to dominant ideologies of gender. Cach and Yardley, in their presentation of viable alternative models of masculinity, reveal the inability of dominant masculinity to maintain the right to represent the normative. These texts destabilize the idea of a

knowable gender and illuminate new understandings of women's concerns with what role men should play in their lives in 21<sup>st</sup> century American society. Markham's text also opens up discussions of masculinity, but emphasizes instead how dominant ideologies of masculinity can be upheld by policing alternative masculinities that pose a threat to the current structure. While the closure of the narrative aims to keep traditional gender roles in tact, the plot has shown how dominant masculinity is only achieved and made to look natural by setting strict limits on what bodies do and do not qualify to be deemed intelligible representations of masculinity. As this chapter shows, Chick Lit proves to be an area rich with potential for discovering how powerful ideologies concerning gender are being circulated and disturbed. My next chapter takes this notion a step further by examining how heroines attempt to perform dominant ideologies of motherhood, since motherhood, like masculinity, is another heavily policed area of gender expression. Similar to how I defined how dominant, white, heterosexual masculinity is represented in these texts, Chapter Four analyzes how mainstream understandings and expectations tied to motherhood are explored in Mommy Lit, a subgenre of Chick Lit that focuses on the aspirations and problems facing mothers. I deepen my reflection of how Butlerian notions of limits on gender expression shape the styles of motherhood that women are able to perform and draw more conclusions about the anxieties and tensions this reveals about the reader's concerns with motherhood today.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE POLITICS OF PERFORMING MOTHERHOOD IN MOMMY LIT

*We heard . . . mothers' conversations comparing how old their kids were when they first spoke, potty trained, and split an atom. Of course, it was all done very politely, under the guise of exchanging information, but the subtext was clear. Mothering was an Olympic sport . . . there was no way I was going to be able to keep up with this.*

--Jennifer Coburn, *Tales from the Crib*

In her essay “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions,” Judith Butler argues that gender has no internal or natural essence; rather, “gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (Butler, The Reader 94). This continual stylization takes place within a matrix of existing cultural norms that aim to control and reinforce the social parameters of what is considered to be socially acceptable expressions of gender. For Butler, there exists no inherent expression of ‘femininity,’ or by extension here—‘motherhood’—for female bodies; there is no natural body or state of gendered being that “preexists culture and discourse” (Butler, The Reader 91). Instead, the body, as “a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated,” is always undergoing the project of gender—a project that depends on what social pressures act to interpret the body and gender in that time and place, something Butler refers to as “social temporality” (Butler, The Reader 113-14). This chapter analyzes several popular texts that span the spectrum of American Mommy Lit to begin a discussion of how motherhood is being performed and what anxieties and tensions surround motherhood. I argue that even as the books narratively rehearse dominant ideologies tied to white, middle class motherhood—and provide readers with a happy ending where the heroine successfully negotiates her role as mother—the texts reveal desires and tensions that challenge the rhetoric of intensive mothering that is, in these texts, held up as the ideal style of motherhood. Furthermore, by keeping discussions of motherhood within the binary confines of single and married, the texts threaten to naturalize experiences of motherhood

specific to white, privileged women and eschew discussion of other models of motherhood that focus less on mother-child intimacy and more on community-based parenting methods. Despite the subgenre's shortcoming in this aspect, I focus here on moments in the texts that illuminate strategies of resistance to dominant ideologies of motherhood often presented through popular media.

Although the performance of motherhood is couched in the language of individual choice and will (a rhetoric common to Chick Lit more broadly), when examined carefully, one sees how styles of motherhood are policed by very restrictive constraints and limits. I employ a Butlerian lens in this chapter to examine Risa Green's *Notes From the UnderBelly* and *Tales from the Crib*, Emily Giffin's *Baby Proof*, Holly Chamberlin's *Babyland*, and Nelsie Spencer's *The Playgroup* in regard to how heroines struggle with negotiating normative expectations of motherhood by performing the "mother" within a specific set of cultural parameters. Authors highlight the artificiality of performing motherhood and offer up moments of resistance that question the constraints put on the heroines to conform to dominant understandings of the "good mother." Interestingly, heroines often begin the books with the desire to resist dominant discourses of mothering and end the books by succumbing to dominant ideologies that define the contemporary American "good mother," a process that arguably communicates the inability to resist the controlling mainstream understandings of motherhood as well as the inability of authors to envision alternatives to the patriarchal structure that places the most value on women who become mothers. The narrative structure works to appease the reader who might identify with the anxieties of new motherhood by temporarily assuaging these fears and reassuring her that she can find happiness within the system if only she makes the right *choices*. Such narrative resolution provides the reader with a sense of fulfillment and hence works superficially as an

ending. Yet, using such rhetoric encourages complicity among its readers to accept these gendered regulations—a very dangerous outcome indeed.

While the books may be seen as rehearsing gendered expectations regarding the role of the “good mother,” the heroines, in drawing attention to the unnatural, unfixed, performative nature of motherhood, imply that gender is indeed, in Butler’s words, “open to rearticulation”—a theory that contains within itself numerous opportunities for resistance (Butler, Undoing Gender 214). There are subversive points in the texts where the heroines challenge notions tied to the “intensive mothering” rhetoric which we see often reflected in popular media and by other model mother characters in the texts. These moments of resistance, of hesitation, confirm the anxiety women feel about conforming to certain dominant styles of motherhood. The performances of motherhood reveal the social norms that serve to police expressions of gender and reproduce dominant conceptions of the “mother.” Styles of motherhood that these heroines perform parody the idea of true, authentic gendered identity as motherhood proves to be “a corporeal style and a copy of a copy,” leading me to conclude that, in these Mommy Lit texts, motherhood is, indeed, “a changeable and revisable reality” (Butler, Undoing Gender 19). While the narrative is superficially resolved when the heroine’s conception of motherhood folds into the dominant, the desire that the heroines exhibit *to resist* goes unresolved. Such desire cannot be realized within the confines of what is recognized as acceptable gender expression in the novel. As such, the feeling of closure that the books provide is unsettling at best—leaving the reader full of questions about the meaning and fate of alternative styles of motherhood that resist and/or fall outside of the recognized mainstream styles, but are policed, reined in, and transformed to conform to the dominant. Identifying and normalizing an original “mother,” as these novels do in the end, disallows other “mother” bodies to exist as legitimate, intelligible representations of a

mother. While the books reveal telling methods and moments of resistance, the inability to conceptualize an alternative model for the mother cannot be ignored either, as it is the greatest pitfall of this subgenre of Chick Lit.

This chapter begins by drawing on some contemporary feminist mothering theorists as well as examples from texts to locate the discourse of “intensive mothering” that structures the dominant style of motherhood that these heroines attempt to resist. I do this to clearly illustrate how the lines that mark the “good mother” are drawn and how the constraints are formed for the white, professionally employed, urban mother. The chapter then goes on to discuss two of the most intense ways mainstream white motherhood is policed, and hence two of the most anxiety-ridden desires heroines exhibit in their attempts to conform to dominant ideologies of the “good mother.” Locating and using one's maternal gene and refraining from any kind of sexually deviant or sexually fulfilling activity are two expectations tied to “intensive mothering” rhetoric; while these have the strictest limitations and expectations set on them, they also hold the greatest potential for resistance. Applying Butler’s theories of performativity helps me to argue that the heroines are encouraged and pressured into performing motherhood in ways that accept gendered regulations of the ideal, white mother figure. The novels uncover attempts to negotiate motherhood in some in-between spaces that call into question the naturalness of the “intensive mothering” rhetoric that has, for the most part, shaped the heroine’s understanding of motherhood. Heroines strive to integrate motherhood into their former identities, and the books point out the ridiculous measures that they will go to maintain the feelings of control that they have come to associate with empowerment.

I’d like to first familiarize the reader with the general plotlines of Mommy Lit books. There are three different periods of motherhood usually covered in the books—pregnancy, the

birth of a baby, and the mothering of young children. Books that deal with pregnancy usually begin with a woman reluctant to have a baby because she fears she will lose control over her life and will fail to manage both her professional life and new motherhood. Sometimes the heroine is met unexpectedly with the reality of an unplanned pregnancy. Either way, the books start with a heroine unwilling to accept the reality of impending motherhood. Slowly, over the course of the book, through trials and tribulations and watching other female characters in the book deal with states of singleness and/or marriage and children, the woman comes to accept her situation. With books that deal with new motherhood, the majority of the novel chronicles the new mother's fears regarding how to mother and focuses on her foibles and humorous instances of failing to measure up to the standards of mothering set by other characters in the book who have natural inclinations toward mothering. Through trials and tribulations, this character searches out her maternal gene, forms a relationship with her baby, and effectively "mothers". Texts that concentrate on the mother with older children highlight the difficulties of playing the role of the good, attentive mother while maintaining some kind of personal and/or professional identity. Here the children serve as physical reminders of the mother's responsibility to mother. Heroines who begin the books resisting and/or questioning the role of the mother end the books by conforming to dominant ideologies of intensive mothering.

### Setting the Limits: Locating the Discourse of Contemporary Intensive Mothering

As perhaps the single most influential communicator of gendered norms, the media plays an important role in shaping and disseminating dominant discourses of motherhood in American society. As Lara complains in *Tales From the Crib*, the "irresponsible journalism" presented in

such publications as *Us Weekly* and *People* magazine that “snap those pictures of Kate Hudson and Gwyneth Paltrow, out on the town with their brand-new, three-day-old babies . . . in full hair and makeup” misleads the public into thinking that having a baby is “nothing more than a trendy fashion accessory” (Green, *Tales* 9). These images of affluent, white motherhood abound as ideal styles of motherhood for the Mommy Lit heroine. Such representations of new motherhood need a disclaimer, the witty Lara argues—something along the lines of: “*do not be fooled into thinking that you, too, will be able to get your shit together enough to even leave the house for ten minutes at any point in the near future, because you won’t.*—Ed” (Green, *Tales* 9-10). When Heather Hewett argues that “[The Mommy Lit heroine] is on a journey from womanhood to motherhood, and her challenge lies in integrating her new role into her former identity,” she hits the nail on the head (“You Are Not Alone” 120). Lara admits to being under the impression that somehow she would be able to incorporate her new life with a baby into her former identity successfully. While the media tends to celebrate the new mom’s ability to snap right back into her previous lifestyle with her new fashion accessory—an image that paradoxically seems to stress both an intimacy with the baby and the ability to disconnect motherhood from biological demands on a woman’s body—it simultaneously stresses the importance of characteristics associated with “intensive mothering.” In this case, the “good mother” has been updated for the 21<sup>st</sup> century urban, professional mom, and babies have been re-packaged as fashion accessories that can aid in the woman’s quest for agency. This symbiotic relationship is all made possible, of course, by money, access to resources, and a disavowal of deviant desires that tempt the heroine.

Prominent contemporary motherhood theorist Andrea O’Reilly defines the “good mother” as: “white, heterosexual, able-bodied, married and in a nuclear family . . . [She is] altruistic, patient, loving, selfless, devoted, nurturing, cheerful . . . Good mothers put the needs of



their children before their own . . . [and] are the primary caregivers of their children . . . And, of course, mothers are not sexual!” (qtd. in Hewett “Talkin’ Bout a Revolution” 38). The “good mother” is often described as one who must be entirely self-sacrificing, with the child’s well-being occupying her every thought. Because society holds the “good mother” accountable for her child’s success (which in turn defines her success and worth), the “good mother” continually seeks out parenting advice that will allow her to align herself with the gendered norms that society places on her. We see this powerful discourse operating in the popular media mostly—products and lifestyles are marketed to white middle-class mothers by drawing on the expectation to consume in order to achieve these images of the good mother. The social norms communicated by this image of the “good mother” serve as the matrix of existing cultural norms that enforce codes of gender in these texts.

Dominant discourses of motherhood that circulate in the popular media and infiltrate the lives of many American women today assume that new mothers have the resources and ability to bounce back to their previous (usually professionally employed) lifestyles and that these women naturally exhibit behaviors associated with “intensive mothering,” such as a natural desire to take care of their pregnant bodies, breastfeed, and refrain from any sexual activities that put a strain on their relationship with their baby or challenge the image of the mother as naturally heterosexual. Consumerism is touted as the answer to achieving the style of motherhood that the moms in these books are expected to conform to. If they cannot return to work and conform to the image of the successful mom in that sense, they should be able to purchase a nanny to do the “mothering” for them. Likewise, if they find that they are not naturally equipped with what it takes to be the “good mother,” they can buy the products and services that will effectively communicate behaviors associated with the style, such as altruism, patience, and devotion.

Consuming in this way, however, occludes consideration of mothering styles of many working-class women and women of color. Mommy Lit, in presenting the dominant style of motherhood that the heroines resist as white and affluent, points to the stronghold such a style has on women even as it serves to silence the voices of many other women.

Deesha Philyaw, in an online article entitled “There’s Something Missing From Mommy Lit,” notes that “the absence of black mommy memoirs mirrors the relative absence of black women’s voices in mainstream U.S. media discourse about motherhood in general.” Philyaw ponders the reason for the relative absence of black voices in popular media representations of motherhood, and quotes economist Julianne Malveaux to help explain the sharp contrast between white women’s conceptions of motherhood and black women’s: “Some African-American women want to yawn at the angst about shouldering multiple burdens and juggling multiple roles. Been there, done that, got the t-shirt so long ago that I recycled it.” Echoing bell hooks’ argument that feminist attacks on motherhood have “alienated” many women of color who “find parenting one of the few interpersonal relationships where they are affirmed and appreciated,” Philyaw brings to the table voices of women from under-represented groups. Amid cultural and economic imperialist forces, black feminists, hooks argues, do not feel the same kind of isolation and antipathy for staying at home since black women have been working so long that they have often wanted to return to the home to escape feelings of alienation in the workplace. Noting that since the 1940s, black women have outnumbered white women in the labor force, Philyaw argues that “this simply wasn’t [and isn’t?] our fight.” Presenting as it does mainly white women’s experiences of motherhood, Mommy Lit runs the risk of “promot[ing] the idea that this minority’s experience is somehow universal” (Philyaw).

As the audience for these Mommy Lit books is predominantly white women with

disposable income (though the books arguably appeal to women of color with similar class status), the narratives, in seeking to normalize ideologies of white motherhood, serve an important political function. As Marsha Marotta in “MotherSpace: Disciplining through the Material and Discursive” explains:

The idea of the ‘good’ mother is deployed through material and discursive spaces in order to mobilize subjectivities that are socially adapted and useful—keeping the attention of mothers focused on children and their needs, wants, and activities, which serve the needs, wants, and activities of Western culture with its hierarchies by sex, race, class, and so on.” (Marotta 16)

Rehearsing conformity to white, wealthy styles of motherhood is useful for current structures of patriarchal power to maintain control. It is also useful for such systems to ignore the many realities of other methods of mothering as those hooks discusses, such as valuing and discussing men's roles in raising children as well as community-based child care. Community-based child rearing would truly revolutionize mothering because it would break down the idea that "parents, especially mothers, should be the only child-rearers" (hooks 144-45). The narratives end by offering superficial resolutions that rely on the rhetoric of choice to solve problems instead of probing the reader to engage in cultural critique. The moments of resistance that I will discuss, however, point to the instability of such an ideological project to maintain norms of white, affluent motherhood.

Various characters, when they condemn the heroine for “selfish” behavior, echo the dominant discourse of motherhood that prizes women’s innate attachment to her baby and natural tendency to be altruistic. Intensive mothering assumes certain natural behaviors and uses of a woman’s body. Lara’s decision to bottle-feed her baby at a Mommy and Me class in *Tales*

*From the Crib* is met with derision and stares of “horror” from the other mothers, who watch with “eyeballs bulging out of their sockets” as she fumbles making a messy and clumpy bottle of formula (Green, Tales 98). The guilt Lara feels regarding her choice to quit breastfeeding worsens as she faces critical inquires not only from these mothers, but also from her friend, nanny, doctor, and her husband, Andrew. When she brings up the idea of bottle-feeding at her doctor appointment, it is completely dismissed as silly when “Andrew and Dr. Newman just [shake] their heads at [her]” (Green, Tales 36). Because breastfed babies are understood to “have higher IQs, get sick less often, have fewer allergies, are less likely to become obese as adults, and are more likely to win the Pulitzer prize” (the last one a witty addition by Lara), failing to breastfeed inevitably means failing to be a good mother. Despite Lara’s success at gathering evidence to the contrary, the expectation to breastfeed is so bound up in understandings of “good mothering” that Lara’s overwhelming guilt results in a serious and lengthy (therefore, ironic) talk with her 7-week-old daughter to explain her decision. Here, Green mocks the societal expectation that breast-feeding initiates the close bond between mother and baby when she explains in all seriousness to her baby:

[Stacey says] we have to build a relationship . . . But I can’t do that if I’m breast-feeding, because it makes me frustrated with you, and it makes me resent you . . . And so I’ve decided to stop. Because even though it probably doesn’t seem like it right now, our relationship is important to me. More important than your IQ.  
(Green, Tales 93)

A decision to stop breast-feeding that requires a sit-down negotiation talk with one’s baby illustrates the effects such strong regulations set by “intensive mothering” rhetoric have on enforcing certain parameters of motherhood. While sometimes this discourse of “good

mothering” is voiced via certain characters, such as Lara’s friend Julie--who denies that she ever had any postpartum depression and claims she “didn’t cry once, and [she] loved Lily from the moment she was born”--often these expectations surrounding the “good mother” are so ingrained in the heroine’s understanding of motherhood already that her friend is merely the channel through which dominant societal expectations regarding motherhood are voiced (Green, Tales 110). The dangers associated with failing to embrace dominant understandings of motherhood lurk everywhere in Mommy Lit as heroines attempt to navigate the ambivalences and anger that they feel toward motherhood. The expectation to breastfeed in this novel is treated with ridicule by the author; she uses humor to illustrate the unnaturalness many women may feel toward it and the ridiculous pressure and guilt male enforcers place on women to do it. Lara’s decision to stop breastfeeding is a small act of resistance against the limits and expectations being forced on her by dominant ideologies of what define a good mother.

Despite book covers that suggest the opposite, Mommy Lit heroines are often highly skeptical of the media’s promise that women can seamlessly incorporate babies and family life into their former professional identity—an identity that they have worked hard to create. They fear that pregnancy and the resulting baby will cause them to lose control over their lives and that they will be demoted or lose their careers entirely. They fear that the surge of emotions that occurs in pregnancy or the postpartum period will take over and cause them to lose control of reality. These fears prove to be legitimate because many of the heroines face difficulty in regaining composure in their careers or integrating the realities of motherhood into their careers, a situation that inevitably leads them to succumb to the strong regulations that seek to enforce the actions of the “good mother.” As Butler contends, the body is the site of oppression; cultural meaning is produced and reproduced through gender. Chick Lit heroines fashion their identities

and find meaning solely through their bodies—in how they accessorize them and how they place them in professional fields and workplaces in an effort to empower themselves. Motherhood is a threat to these women because it is a force that acts directly on the body and threatens to compromise aspects of that free will; heroines fear the dismantling of the fashioned identity that they've tried so hard to construct in the capitalistic society in which they live.

The Chick Lit heroine values her ability to make and keep schedules and timelines to ensure continued success as a single, professional woman, but the Mommy Lit heroine fears losing control of these methods of maintaining composure in work and personal life. While a focus on organization and responsibility has been key to her success as a single, professional woman, a “good mother,” our heroines come to find out, is also expected to acquiesce to routines and behaviors that emulate “self-control, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice, because anything else is deemed deficient” (Marotta 24). In this way, “intensive mothering” rhetoric also informs the working woman’s style of motherhood. The message communicated to expectant mothers through media representations of motherhood is that “a mother with self-control produces happier, well-adjusted children by being organized, flexible, planning ahead, having a sense of humor, striving to keep balance in her life, and having a positive attitude” (Marotta 25). When Lara becomes pregnant in *Notes From the Underbelly*, she describes the way she feels as: “so out of control. And I guess I’m just not used to feeling that way. I make lists and I organize things and I count calories and I have routines in place for every aspect of my life for the express purpose of feeling *in control*” (Green, *Notes* 90). The ability to be ultra-organized in their personal lives as well as in their careers equates to success and is an integral component to the postmodern feminine urban identity. For these women, then, mourning the potential loss of their constructed identity in this way is a form of resistance, just as pointing out the difficulties (even

if humorous) that integrating motherhood and careers can cause.

*Babyland*'s Anna, upon finding out she is pregnant, declares: "[it's the] end of my life as I know it" and, upon reluctantly listening to her friend's assertion that "You're not going to be in control of your life . . . So say goodbye to your current routines and habits, honey" decides that a baby wouldn't fit into her lifestyle (Chamberlin 23 and 30). Anna runs a successful catering business and fears that she won't be able to keep her business going and have a baby at the same time. For Anna, the thought of even closing the business for a while is "career suicide," since her success relies upon maintaining business relationships (Chamberlin 88). Claudia, in *Baby Proof*, enjoys her freedom so much so that even the *thought* of having a baby produces in her "a sense of losing control. A sense that something was slipping away" (Giffin 14). She defines her fear of having children as "fear of failure. Fear of change. Fear of the unknown" (94). Mommy Lit heroines define freedom and empowerment by the ability to control their bodies and succeed in their professional lives with the personal characteristics they have adopted as a result—referred to by Lara as self-indulgent behaviors that focus in some way on individual gain. Claudia calls these "unmotherly" faults, traits like being "stubborn, judgmental, moody, impatient" (Giffin 97). For these women, having a baby means giving this up and entering into an unknown space where the parameters that define a successful woman change and become ever more complicated. Claudia attests to this fear when she declares: "I certainly don't want to join the ranks of seemingly miserable working mothers who strive to have it all and end up frustrated, exhausted, and guilt-ridden . . . having both [a baby and a career] means doing nothing very well" (Giffin 38). This sincere reluctance communicates the heroine's belief that the social norms already in place to define motherhood are indeed restrictive and problematic for the professional working woman, as they will not allow her the time and energy to be successful at

work.

If one cannot effectively combine work and motherhood, the pressure in some of the books is to stay home, or “opt out,” of the workforce and focus on one’s role as mother and homemaker. Butler argues that nobody can possibly embody an “original” mother figure—that such a thing does not exist—yet Risa Green’s *Tales From the Crib* sets the standards by which the intelligibility of mother figures will be judged. Lara describes the “HBDW”—Have Babies Don’t Work—mothers as:

Those HBDW girls, their lives are so simple, you know? They don’t expect anything from their husbands, so they’re never disappointed. They don’t have jobs, so they’re never stressed about trying to find a balance. They can spend all of their time talking about their babies, and taking them to classes, and buying them things, and putting index cards on lamp shades, and since they don’t have anything else to do, it’s okay if they leave the kid with the nanny for a few hours a day. (Green, Tales 185)

Moms living in “nonworkingdom” who focus solely on their babies—albeit a very small minority of women in reality—become the “It” moms that Lara feels the pressure to emulate. This sense of absorbing one’s life completely in “intensive mothering” is treated in these texts as the ultimate style of mothering--a style that rewards the seemingly natural tendency of women to mother and stay home. Such a style of motherhood that clearly privileges white, wealthy women comes under attack in these books as it’s shown to be unnatural and unfulfilling, to say nothing of how this theory of mothering leaves out the many contemporary discussions among women of color feminisms that stress the importance of moving the discussion of motherhood into the realm of parenthood. hooks argues that the longer "women or society as a whole see the



mother/child relationship as unique and special . . . responsibility for child care and child-rearing will continue to be primarily women's work" (137).

“Missing the Maternal Gene Entirely”: Learning to be a Mom

Mommy Lit heroines perform motherhood in ways that both question the underlying biological assumptions that “intensive mothering” makes and suggest styles of mothering that might be made intelligible within the societal framework of gendered expectations. In exposing the performative qualities of motherhood—a subversive activity that complicates idealized versions of motherhood and challenges notions of motherhood as natural, fixed, or stable—Mommy Lit texts test the constraints that structure normative versions of motherhood.

In Butler’s call for a radical shift in what we consider to be possible and real, she argues for legitimacy to be extended to bodies that “have been regarded as false, unreal, and unintelligible” (Gender Trouble xxiii). What renders these bodies false is the concept of a true, identifiable, original gender—usually interpreted by mainstream society to be masculine or feminine. This binary construction of gender is problematized, however, when we consider such gender-crossing activities as drag that uproots assumptions about a “natural” heterosexuality. Such purposeful performances, Butler notes, make it “unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion by which we come to understand that what we take to be ‘real,’ what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality” (Gender Trouble xiii). Performances of motherhood, then, are bodily acts that take place within a matrix of existing cultural norms. For other styles of motherhood to be acknowledged and interpreted as real, the concept of a stable mother identity must be debunked.

Butler addresses this issue by suggesting a denaturalization of gender norms in the hope of opening up a proliferation of gender possibilities so as to avoid the kind of “social death” that occurs when one’s gender falls outside the norm. A similar binary construction of the “good mother” and “bad mother” or, perhaps more accurately, “mother” and “nonmother,” exists in Mommy Lit texts. The heroine is often presented as attempting to negotiate a marginalized mother identity amid the demands to conform to a dominant discourse of motherhood. Her performance of motherhood is always in response to the ambivalence, fear, and/or anger that she feels toward the promises of pregnancy or motherhood embedded in the dominant discourse and, as such, opens up new meanings of motherhood and possibilities for nonnormative expressions of gender and desire.

The styles of motherhood that the women perform in these texts are driven by underlying fears of what it *means* to be a mother, of how one can access one’s “maternal gene” beginning with the onset of pregnancy. As Rebecca Kukla reminds us in “Pregnant Bodies in Public Space”: “It is during th[is] perio[d] of transition that our sense of self can most easily be co-opted; this is when we are most vulnerable to public constructions that can ultimately jeopardize our healthy boundaries and our integrity and autonomy” (302). As technical and medical practices of prenatal care have evolved to increase the visibility and accessibility of the fetus, it has become “subject to general civic surveillance and concern and is taken as a seat of civic rather than merely personal responsibilities” (Kukla 285). This is exactly what the baby becomes in Mommy Lit texts--a civic responsibility that the woman is expected to raise--rather than a close personal or familial desire or decision. Kukla goes on to argue that “generic public representations of a single, canonical fetal figure” have become commonplace, increasing the public’s interest in and expectations of the pregnant woman’s body (288). Hence, Kukla

concludes, “forging an individualized bond with this public figure . . . has become a special kind of project for the pregnant woman” (288). In this way, the fetus becomes an actual person who the heroine is expected to form a committed and healthy relationship with.

Newly pregnant Lara, in *Notes from the Underbelly*, declares that she is already failing at motherhood when her friend carefully informs her of what she should and shouldn’t be eating, supplements she should be taking, birthing classes that she should be enrolling in, and emotions and symptoms that she should be feeling. Lara feels as if she is “missing the maternal gene entirely” because she has no desire to have a baby and the best “pro” she can come up with for having a baby is time off from work, which she envisions will be some kind of extended summer leave (Green, Notes 88). Lara is disgusted by a woman’s lactating breasts and finds the woman’s baby so boring and ugly that she quickly loses interest in holding her (Green, Notes 87). She is absolutely terrified of childbirth and hates that every stranger feels the need to comment on her pregnancy. She is, in all, very uncomfortable with the idea of being a mother.

The “good mother” is expected to naturally, and easily, get in touch with her “maternal gene”—the almost magical entity or urge that ensures the ability to achieve motherhood. Fears surrounding the inability to find this gene, and hence inability to measure up to expectations of the “good mother,” are prevalent from the moment of conception. Kukla asserts:

Contemporary mothers are held responsible from the moment of conception for controlling and perfecting their children’s IQ, allergies, sense of rhythm, facial structure, freedom from genetic diseases, and much more, through what they eat when they are pregnant and nursing, what music they play during pregnancy and infancy, what feeding implements they use, etc. (294)

Failing to demonstrate that a mother abides by such dictums is cause for her body to be deemed

unfit for motherhood. Toy companies, formula brands, and other industries market products by promising that they will aid in the baby's cognitive and nutritional health while in the womb through postpartum. Heroines are expected to follow the guidance of their maternal gene and consume the right things in order to show that they are conforming with the image of a fit, good mother.

Lara's pro-pregnancy, pro-baby friend embodies the rhetoric of "intensive mothering" and provides a wealth of information for exactly what Lara should be consuming. Even though Lara claims to "hate" Julie because she consistently makes her feel "socially inadequate," she is reluctantly all ears to Julie's intense recommendation of getting on the waitlist for Susan Greenspan's Mommy and Me class, despite the fact she is only a couple of weeks pregnant (Green, Notes 59). Lara is expected to visit the website "Your baby dot com" to receive weekly updates about her pregnancy so that she can track her baby's every development in the womb and to watch Real Births to get an idea of what the birth could be like. When Lara asks if there is more that she should know about what to do and buy to bond with her fetus, Julie knowingly responds with the open-ended comment: "You have no idea" (Green, Notes 62).

When Lara expresses her preference for epidurals and her honest discomfort with watching a birth, Julie condemns her for such an unmotherly comment by retorting "You know, Lara . . . They say that happy mommies make happy babies. . . The more you fight it, the angrier and more stressed out you're going to be, and I really believe that babies can pick up on that from inside the womb" (Green, Notes 116). Not only are women expected to consume certain things to communicate conformity with representations of the "good mother" on the outside, but voicing distrust with methods or beliefs associated with dominant expectations of motherhood is warrant for accusing the heroine of harming the baby-to-be. In these texts, it is other women who

hold women accountable for upholding dominant understandings of the “good mother.” The pressure to conform is great when one’s own good friend acts as the mouthpiece for society. Additionally, when Lara voices her opinion that “you have to admit that having a baby is a little bit gross,” not only does Julie respond with derision, but her husband reacts by “plac[ing] his forearms on the edge of the table and buries his face in them,” clearly embarrassed (Green, Notes 116). The reaction here is indicative of society’s reluctance to associate negative or destructive tendencies with the maternal figure. Or, when a woman does engage in destructive or violent acts with children, society vilifies her. There is no better example of this than Fox News’ coverage of missing Kaylee or responses to Andrea Yates’ driving her kids off a cliff or, more recently, the moral controversies that have erupted over the California “octo-mom” who bore eight babies via artificial insemination. Women are harshly criticized when they fail to conform to society’s expectations of the “good mother.” Such an understanding of motherhood simply isn’t available and remains incomprehensible in the popular imaginary. Immediately understanding her comment as “obnoxious,” Lara recognizes the unacceptable nature of her view and expects the reaction that she receives. She is not entitled to voice such a view, as failing to perform loving, altruistic acts with children is interpreted as an unnatural and unacceptable representation of the maternal.

Later in the novel, when Lara confesses: “for the sake of my unborn child and my own future sanity, I’m going to make an effort to be nice. Or at least nicer,” she buys into the dominant discourse that, one, the mother’s relationship with her fetus/baby is most important and, two, that a woman’s temperament affects her unborn child (Green, Notes 130). She views her decision as healthy and progressive, as one moving away from selfishness and toward compassion. Despite innate uncertainty regarding her role as mother, Lara acquiesces to

understanding her role as mother within the social parameters of gender currently available to her. Such an ending fails in the Butlerian sense of legitimizing alternative expressions of gender, but does reinforce for the reader how strict cultural norms police motherhood. As we'll see, severe limits are set for restricting expressions of motherhood that, despite attempts at resistance, leave these women no alternative models to embrace. But, as Butler argues, such limits are counterproductive, in that they “are, in a sense, what fantasy loves most” (Butler, The Reader 190). For Butler, what we perceive to be “real”—the acts of mothering in these texts and around us—is really, because it is “wielded within political discourse,” a syntactically regulated phantasm [where] fantasy postures as the real” (The Reader 187). If what we perceive to be real is really a politically regulated and produced fiction, then limits act to “eroticize” the taboo acts or feelings, hence preserving instead of eradicating the desires. In other words, setting limits for the expression of motherhood as these texts do actually serves to reignite the desires for resistance rooted in anxiety, despair, and uncertainty in acts of mothering.

The pressure to uncover one's “maternal gene” begins even before the onset of pregnancy, in how one views family and the potential of motherhood. The rhetoric of “intensive mothering” expects women to find motherhood naturally fulfilling and to accept motherhood as the be-all end-all definitive marker of womanhood. Anti-conformity in this respect is regulated in Mommy Lit texts as well until the heroine becomes complicit in the project of dominant motherhood. The introspective Claudia wonders throughout *Baby Proof* what reasons people give for *wanting* children. She notes that women are always questioned about their decisions *not* to have children, as if such a decision is abnormal and reflective of a woman's self-centeredness that can only lead to a disappointing, unfulfilled life. When her friend Jess informs her that she should have a baby “to give [her] life meaning,” Claudia vehemently retorts by declaring that her

life as it is already has meaning (Giffin 110). But, later in the book, upon finding out that Jess is pregnant, Claudia voices her fear that Jess' life will become "so much more" than hers—a statement that reveals that she has accepted the unstated premises of "intensive mothering" (Giffin 203). Such a change in her thinking indicates the strength of the cultural forces that define motherhood. Her earlier questions, however, attract the reader who somewhere deep inside dares to wonder the same thing. In that these questions dominate the majority of the text, Claudia's nonconformity with dominant discourses of motherhood serves as a refreshing reminder that the notion that having children makes women's lives more valuable is at once nonsensical even as it is incredibly powerful.

As Daphne—Claudia's sister whose inability to conceive leads to a desperate, overwhelming desire to have a baby—debates with her husband over whose "fault" it is that she can't get pregnant and how much longer they should "fight" infertility, it becomes clear that the dominant discourse on motherhood prizes purposeful, individual effort aimed at achieving pregnancy. This dominant ideology assumes that women naturally desire to become mothers because achieving motherhood makes a woman's life worth that much more. Such a belief system alienates those who can't conceive, leaving them to feel as if they are failures at motherhood and true womanhood. Furthermore, because "gender . . . figures a precondition for the production and maintenance of legible humanity," any deviation from the norm questions the humanity of the subject (Butler, Undoing Gender 11). Butler locates gendered bodies who conform to dominant ideologies of motherhood within the frame of the human and those who do not conform as outside the realm of the human. While Claudia keenly searches for exceptions to the rule throughout the book, for successful alternatives to the married woman with children, her complicity by the end of the book shows society's deeply embedded adherence to systems of

prevailing heterosexist norms. Despite her conformity by the end of the book, the question that Claudia raises is a valid and challenging one—clearly one many women would rather not address the complexities of. Her decision, then, to open herself to the idea of children—a move that wins back the husband who has been pressuring her all along to have a baby—reads less as a happy ending than a forced compliance with the gendered rules of society. No viable alternative exists for the professional woman who wants desperately to cling to the privileges that she has both been afforded and become accustomed to with her urban lifestyle.

The woman who *chooses* to remain childless is really nowhere in these Mommy Lit texts because such a gendered body is unintelligible within the confines of these texts. Becoming open to the thought of having a baby, delivering a baby, or successfully finding a way to have a baby are typical outcomes for the heroine in Mommy Lit texts. As Butler would say, we have yet as a society to construct a positive and satisfying image of the woman who chooses to be child-less when she is in a situation deemed by society to be advantageous for having a baby. The white, middle-class married woman, for example, who chooses not to have a baby (or who cannot get a grip on her relationship with her newborn) is questioned, marked as abnormal, and even to an extent vilified in the Mommy Lit subgenre. *Baby Proof's* Claudia is the woman attempting to choose no children when, near the end of the book, she shows that she has absorbed the dominant discourse of motherhood and expresses a “sense of profound disappointment” about her current fling as a “single” woman (she is currently separated from her husband) (Giffin 253). She goes on to opine: “there is something almost tragic about a no-strings-attached kind of life” (Giffin 265). The heterosexist norms that shape the structure of motherhood perpetually reward expressions of normative gender and desire and fail to “undo restrictively normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life” (Butler, Undoing Gender 1). Though many heroines remain single



throughout Chick Lit narratives, Mommy Lit books tend to narrate the experiences of women looking for *more* in their lives, women facing the realities and pressures of taking on that next step. The social norms that enforce the dominant discourse of mothering do not allow for single women or married women to be opposed to having children. The social norms are also very strict here in that they maintain the binary of single and married when, for most women, motherhood is bound up in more diverse realities that reflect more complicated ways of imagining and living through motherhood.

The alienation felt by the women who either choose or for whatever reason pass up on having kids is best expressed by Tracy in *Babyland*, who declares: “sometimes I feel left out. I feel as if I’m never going to be a full-fledged, card-carrying woman because I missed out on motherhood” (Giffin 280). Almost always the heroine ends up either conceding to a pregnancy or becoming more open-minded to becoming a mother. *Baby Proof* ends with Claudia considering the possibility of motherhood as the last page closes with an image of her debating whether or not to take her birth control pill. *Notes from the Underbelly* ends with Lara feeling more “maternal” and growing used to the idea of the baby growing inside her. Anna’s failed pregnancy with her former husband in *Babyland* results in her decision to change her life and pursue a man that she has been attracted to for a long time. The book ends with the possibility of having his baby. In these cases, the married woman succumbs to societal pressures to conceive.

Most of the narratives also portray the single, workaholic friend who at the beginning of the book despises the idea of children. By the end of the book, however, this character—partly because she has watched the heroine struggle with the concept of motherhood—ends up embracing the idea of motherhood to such an extreme that she actually becomes the voice of persuasion for the heroine. Consider Jess, who at the beginning of *Baby Proof*, focuses solely on

her career as managing director of a top Wall Street law firm. When she falls in love with a married guy and becomes pregnant, Jess espouses much of the “intensive mothering” rhetoric that eventually convinces Claudia to reconsider pregnancy. By telling Claudia that she can’t possibly understand how she’s feeling—implying that there are enlightened feelings reserved only for women who desire pregnancy—Jess acts as the mouthpiece for society’s expectations for women, even those devoutly connected to their careers, to desire motherhood. What is more, this discourse is so strong that it often works exceptionally speedily on the women characters in Chick Lit with the most prestigious jobs and most years of education. The allure of dominant ideologies of motherhood is so strong that even those women presented as the most “liberated” succumb in the end. In this way, the narratives suggest that despite attempts at resistance, these women have nowhere to go and no alternative models to embrace. The constraints limit expressions of motherhood to only those of affluent white women who ascribe to a dictum of intensive mothering. Women who fail at becoming biological mothers are in some sense deprived of complete happiness. Conceptualizing motherhood in this way reaffirms again the importance of the connection between mother and baby, which disallows discussions of other models of motherhood.

Authors highlight the performative quality of searching for the maternal gene so as to draw attention to the unnaturalness of it. The different tests that Mommy Lit heroines undertake to prove their eligibility for the role of mother and the existence of the maternal gene underscore the unstable and tenuous nature of the “good mother” figure. A woman is supposed to be imbued with certain innate characteristics that enable her to accept and embrace her new role as mother. The implications of this myth of the maternal gene are an inability for society to comprehend mother bodies that fail to demonstrate acts of altruism. A heroine who doubts that she possesses

this mythic maternal gene must undergo various physical tests that allow her to recognize traits commonly associated with the gene to assure herself that she can indeed become a mother. While this narrative structure again works to reassure readers that they, too, have the maternal gene if only they search hard enough for it, it also points to the unnaturalness of the gene, the assumption that women naturally possess it, and how limits are strictly enforced for those who cannot “find” the gene.

In the case of *Babyland*'s Michaela, it is entirely possible that a woman may not find her maternal gene no matter how hard she searches. Such women are punished in the novels and deemed unfit to pursue motherhood. Instead of something women innately possess and access, the maternal gene becomes something women must search for, a process that emphasizes the very artificial construction of the “good mother.” The inability to locate the gene highlights society's reluctance to accept varied expressions of motherhood, clearly delineating the mother from the nonmother. Social regulations are in place to impact and shape our image of the mother as Michaela's request to adopt is refused “by every legitimate adoption agency” on the grounds that she is ““unfit”” (Chamberlin 400). Her own friends declare that she's “a woman who should not be a parent [because] . . . she's got absolutely no maternal instinct. I bet you couldn't even train it into her. I shudder to think what a child of hers would turn out to be like. At the very least he'd be an emotional cripple” (Chamberlin 346). Her friends admonish single Mikaela for desiring motherhood outside of marriage and question her intent to have a child, paralleling her desire for a child with her desire for expensive things. As our protagonist Anna declares, despite her Chanel coat, Prada bag and Manolo shoes, Mikaela has everything but the one thing she truly desires: “Poor Mikaela . . . Life can be so unfair. She has so much but not the one thing she really wants” (Chamberlin 66). Mikaela's case points to how women—both the author and other

main characters—create the limits and contribute to these restrictive notions of motherhood. They both question the role of the mother and what it takes to be a mother (Anna) just as they are the major enforcers of dominant paradigms of motherhood. Implementing and maintaining limits keep expressions of motherhood within certain boundaries, feeding women the illusion that motherhood is stable, recognizable, and thus, achievable.

Anna's journey to find her maternal gene is about an older woman who is dismayed to learn that she is pregnant. As time goes on, she questions whether the pregnancy is a test or a message as she contemplates the realities of what others refer to as "Advanced Maternal Age" (Chamberlin 50). When she cannot find evidence of a maternal instinct, she wonders whether "there [is] an age limit on maternal feelings and capabilities," suggesting that perhaps she cannot find the gene because it is too late (Chamberlin 53). At times she envisions her pregnancy as a test for her to become a better person—more responsible and less self-centered. Declaring "I have no faith in my parenting skills" because she has no first-hand experience with kids, Anna is forced to accept all of the realities of biology and the ensuing unplanned pregnancy unprepared (Chamberlin 48). Her proclamation that "The Body was unreliable. The Body was life" foreshadows her belief that because the baby might be her "last chance," warming up to the idea of even having a baby was the equivalent of finding her maternal gene (Chamberlin 92). Interestingly, this instinct takes the form of an acceptance that her body could do this to her, could make her biologically a mother whether she wanted it or not. When she loses the baby, though sad at first, Anna becomes "flooded with desire" for another man, leaving her to feel "euphoric . . . dizzily alive" (Chamberlin 286). Feeling as if she's "finally living [her] own life," Anna reveals how much more natural it feels for her to be single and in pursuit of individual desires not compounded by realities faced by pregnancy and children (Chamberlin 312).

It is clear, however, that Anna has really found her maternal instinct when she treats the baby as a refuge for her emotional problems. When Jack makes her feel bad, she states: “At least I had the baby,” revealing her understanding of the baby as a concrete reminder that she herself matters (Chamberlin 259). After she loses the baby, she promptly gets rid of all baby and pregnancy-related items, purging her life of all of the physical reminders of impending motherhood. Anna is not rewarded with motherhood; rather, her character is banned from embracing motherhood because she doesn’t abide by the rules, the gendered regulations of what a mother should be like. Instead, she is portrayed as too selfish and committed to her own desires to incorporate motherhood into her life. So while she seems to find love for a new man, and the narrative seems to end on a happy note since this decision is enabled by choice, her character is denied motherhood because she could not locate the maternal gene.

While *Babyland*’s Anna provides an example of the woman who failed her tests at motherhood, both *Notes from the Underbelly*’s Lara and *Baby Proof*’s Claudia undergo elaborate physical tests to uncover the infamous maternal gene, pointing to the performative qualities necessary to achieving and/or maintaining the image of the “good mother.” Both women are convinced that they do not possess what it takes to be a mother largely because of failed relationships with their own mothers. As they watched their mothers struggle through motherhood, the heroines determined that their mothers were not ideal mothers; Lara blames her mother for being “a working mom who had neither the time nor the inclination to bake cookies or pies for me” (Green, *Notes* 201). The heroines fear they will replicate the mothers’ actions and will also fail to live up to the image of the ideal mother.

*Notes From the Underbelly*’s Lara works as a high school counselor at a prestigious private school for kids desiring to get into college and is in constant search for evidence that she

can be a mother throughout the book. As a woman self-professed to be “too selfish,” Lara concerns herself at the beginning of the book in her pre-pregnancy state with such superficial concerns as not being able to wear her normal clothes once she’s pregnant and what she finds to be the disgusting nature of breastfeeding (Green, Notes 20). Once Lara becomes pregnant, however, she becomes determined to embrace motherhood. In an intentional effort to warm up to the idea of pregnancy, Lara forces herself to be “motherly” toward Tick, the defiant high school girl that Lara must help get into college. When Tick ends up at a party that Lara is attending and accidentally drinks too much, Lara helps her when she becomes sick in the bathroom. When Lara tells her husband later how she helped Tick through her throwing-up spells, he responds incredulously: “You did? . . . If I didn’t know better, I might think that you were softening up on me” (Green, Notes 199). Knowing that Lara won’t even usually help him when he’s sick, he is completely dumbfounded when she explains how she helped someone. Lara’s actions were an intentional effort to provide help for someone other than herself and this surprises even her: “I know . . . can you believe that?” (Green, Notes 199). To explain her motherly actions, Lara comments that she feels sorry for Tick, whose mother doesn’t pay attention to her: “I think she’s kind of a footnote in her parents’ lives. They just pay attention to her when it’s convenient for them. It’s really sad” (Green, Notes 199). After this first motherly action that she describes as a “temporary moment of weakness,” several other episodes occur that test Lara’s ability to mother (Green, Notes 200). Shortly after this incident, Lara shares a nurturing moment with her friend Julie—something she refers to as “the second time in two weeks that I’ve been—dare I even say it?—nurturing”—when she tells Julie that she thinks she is brave for going through with childbirth the natural way and that she wishes she could be like her (Green, Notes 223). Julie responds with: “Now you’re the one who’s out of character. Stop being so nice; you’re scaring

me” (Green, Notes 223).

Clearly Lara must work hard at being nurturing, as it is not in her character. Lastly, Lara is left in charge of a 2-year-old who she ends up being able to potty train with the innovative method of reading him the book *Everyone Poops*. Encouraged by the idea that “this is a seminal moment for me. A life-changing moment, really,” she declares: “Yes. I am going to do it. I am” (Green, Notes 245). While the book makes the assumption that pregnancy has the ability to naturally uncover one’s “motherly” qualities and tendencies, this uncovering is informed by an intentional desire to perform a style of motherhood. While Lara seems to become more caring once she becomes pregnant, the reader understands this to be less a natural characteristic of pregnancy than a learned objective. The heroines locate what they need to find and purposefully place themselves in situations that will allow for the greatest performance of the motherly quality that will communicate to others as well as to themselves that they have the capability to be a good mother. Perhaps more dramatically performative in nature than Butler’s notion of performativity allows for, acting out styles of motherhood in this way, arguably, has the same effect as drag performances do. The concept of an original or natural mother figure is questioned at the same time that the reader is reassured that she, too, can find the necessary instincts needed to be a good mother. In this way, the text acts as a conservative rehearsal of traditional gendered norms surrounding motherhood even as it subverts this by exposing the unnaturalness of the ideal mother.

#### UnMotherly Acts of Sexual Agency

Butler points out throughout *Gender Trouble* the temporal and tenuous nature of the

gendered rules of conduct for masculinity, femininity, and by extension, motherhood. She suggests that it is the very laws or taboos that place restrictions on certain dominant expressions of gender that actually *create* the desires that such regulations set out to repress. For example, in discussions of censorship, Butler argues that the very act of enforcing restrictions produces and preserves (rather than eradicates) the fantasy. Similarly, one effectively *becomes* their gender by “repudiate[ing] homosexual attachments” (Butler, The Reader 248). For the heteronormative matrix to remain intact, Butler argues, a clear conception of homosexuality as a deviant act must be realized. Hence, a deviant expression of the non-mother figure is necessary to retaining the image of the dominant mother. The goal of the matrix of cultural norms, however, is to create the illusion that desires to conform are generated naturally from within the self rather than necessitated by strict limits structured by society. She explains: “If the ‘cause’ of desire, gesture, and act can be localized within the ‘self’ of the actor, then the political regulations and disciplinary practices which produce that ostensibly coherent gender are effectively displaced from view” (Butler, The Reader 111). If society understands women as naturally wanting to help themselves become a “good mother,” it will fail to see how inter-workings of regulations, laws, and other structural disciplinary effects expressions of motherhood. The rhetoric of “intensive mothering” includes pursuing limits for individual interests that do not serve to strengthen bonds between mother and child. For example, displaying or initiating deviant sexual behavior is deemed a personal pursuit of pleasure that does not benefit the child in any way. Thus it is deemed a negligent and dangerous activity for the mother to engage in. However, as Butler reminds us, such a strict enforcing of sexual behavior actually serves to preserve the deviant behavior and re-enforce expressions of mainstream motherhood.

In *The Playgroup*, Ellie attempts nonconformity with the codes established by the “good



mother” as she reveals to the reader her insecurities, frustrations, and at times a sense of violent anger with being a mother. She aims to explore sexual desires that challenge the ideal mother figure. Ellie consumes in an effort to mask true desires that deviate from those a good mother is allowed to have. The book is an exploration of what happens to the mother who dares to give into deviant lesbian sexual desire as a means of personal fulfillment. The relationship that she enters into with Missy is both enlightening and fulfilling even as it plagues her with guilt and ultimately naturalizes her role in the nuclear family as the mother who abides by heteronormative constraints. Ellie’s performance of motherhood entails using the market and purchasing power to project the image of the “good mother,” all the while engaging in acts considered deviant to such a role.

Ellie was a successful stand-up comic before she had her two children. She comments at the beginning of the book how she has only done a few shows since their birth and how watching even a few minutes of the news is now a luxury that she doesn’t have time for. Ellie notes how her single friends often advise against having kids—they often encourage abortion or disown friends once they have kids. She says, “They think we’ve been body snatched,” to which she replies, “They’re right” (Spencer 40). Despite little time to herself, the beginning of the novel paints Ellie as a seemingly satisfied stay-at-home mom who devotes her time and attention to her children. Her husband and she even have a dynamic and fulfilling sex life that they organize around parenting. Ellie’s desire to conform to the expectations set forth by the “good mother” dogma crystallize when she ventures to take her daughter to a playgroup meeting on the Upper East Side of New York City that promises to prepare children for entrance into prestigious nursery schools. But what she finds here is very different. Her class status clearly clashes with those of the uppity mothers here; her bulky double stroller cannot compete with the

“Emmaljungas (the Rolls-Royces of baby carriages)” that the other mothers use (Spencer 20).

As she walks to the playgroup for the first time with her son and daughter, she mocks the mothers “eyeing the overpriced home furnishings” and notes the differences between mothers on the East and West Sides: “the big difference between the East and West Sides—accessories; jewelry and scarves and puffy headbands. Everyone over here is perfectly, obnoxiously accessorized” (Spencer 13). When Ellie meets the other mothers in the playgroup, she comments several times that they appear sexless. She says of herself: “I’m the only one in the room who looks like she has reproductive organs” (Spencer 65). Succumbing to sexual desires or even appearing sexual is a no-no for the mother because it focuses attention on herself. Mothers aren’t supposed to be sexual. These uppity women appear to abide by the codes of the “good mother” by presenting themselves as asexual mothers deeply concerned with their children’s welfare. Purchasing power aids in the formulation of an image of the “good mother” without requiring that the women actually engage in all methods of intensive mothering.

From the beginning of the novel, Ellie views these women as sterile; they appear to have completely separated childbirth and childrearing from the realm of the biological or natural. In her close, visceral relationships with her children, Ellie more fully embodies elements of the “good mother.” Like celebrity moms featured in popular media, the uppity mothers communicate that with enough resources any woman can take an active and central role in her child’s life *and* maintain aspects of her former identity. The regulations imposed on the mother wishing to emulate the “good mother” style have created desires in these women to incorporate elements of their former lives and identities into motherhood. Those mothers who have access to resources have pursued these desires through purchasing goods and nannies. Ellie tries to fit in with these women in regards to fashion, but conforming to the dominant style of motherhood that glorifies

the relationship between mother and child proves too difficult because denying herself desires of personal fulfillment continues to produce intense sexual desire. Regarding the topic of sex, she notes that: “You must do it to get some of your old self back. Because you are in danger of being totally swallowed up by motherhood” (Spencer 93). This reiterates the idea that mothers are not supposed to have sexual longings; their bodies should be reserved solely for the child that needs them. All of the other rules that she is following regarding being a good mother—continuing to breastfeed Angus, engaging in co-sleeping with her children, always putting their needs first all day and night—seem to spark alternative desires informed by a need to maintain some kind of personal and sexual identity separate from her children. While she doesn’t have access to the same kind of resources that women like Missy do, she still tries to emulate their style of motherhood, while daring to follow her desire. The pressure to breastfeed Angus is so strong that when she is away from him engaging in her affair with Missy, she equates not giving her son breast milk with not caring about him. When Peter says he fed Angus formula instead, Ellie retorts: “Why didn’t you give him some baby food? . . . No more formula. *I’ll feed him. I’m his fucking mother, for Christ’s sake! . . . You know how important breast milk is. Suddenly I don’t care about my kids?*” (Spencer 211) The expectation to breastfeed is so strong in the rhetoric of “intensive mothering” that Ellie has equated breastfeeding with caring. While she wants to care for her son, the demand to breastfeed is consuming her to the point where it has produced alternative desires that tempt her outside of the matrix of expectations regarding motherhood. Instances like this where Ellie straddles the expectations of the good mother and her own sexual and personal desires texture the book and add to the rising tension that results in her affair with Missy.

Ellie pursues her lesbian sexual desire throughout the book at the cost of putting her

identity as “good mother” at risk. The time she spends away from her children in order to be with Missy leave her feeling incredibly guilty that she is not being a good mother. At the same time, her interaction with Missy is sexually stimulating; here her lactating breasts function to provide her with pleasure rather than define her identity as a mother. Many erotic love scenes between her and Missy corroborate the personal and sexual satisfaction that she craves. Following this desire can be seen as subversive in that Ellie projects an outward appearance of the “good mother,” all the while dealing with intense emotions that result due to her involvement with Missy. This results in an undermining of the naturalness of the “good mother” role and an exploration of personally and sexually fulfilling activities, if only for short periods of time. Confused by her new desires to find fulfillment outside of the demands of motherhood, Ellie ruminates: “I want her, Ellie thought watching the beautiful couple kiss. No, I want to be her. No, that’s not it, I want him!” (Spencer 139). Ellie’s confusion over exactly what or who she wants is scary for her, just as it is empowering. With a nanny at home or someone taking care of the kids, she has the time and space to explore other activities that she desires. Interestingly, it is the presence of money that makes sexual exploration outside heteronormative relationships possible. As such, her sexual adventures are punctured paradoxically by feelings of both guilt and extreme pleasure. These secretive sexual encounters with Missy often happen while someone has taken the children out and abruptly end when the children return home. In this way, the author critiques how the contemporary “good mother” image, as well as the ability to resist the confines of this gendered norm, has become dependent on the ability one has to consume.

When Ellie learns that the babies are back home, a conflicting sense of relief washes over her as the kids bring her back to reality and she “dresse[s] in a heartbeat, then racewalk[s] down the long hallway to see her babies, that tether once again pulling her along” (Spencer 141). The

presence of her children serves as the constant reminder that she can't really engage in such activity. Her sexual engagement takes place only in their absence, a fact that suggests that the encounters are fantastical and fully regulated by the strict heteronormative regulations enforced by the institution of motherhood and nuclear family. Time and time again, Ellie repudiates her love for Missy as well as her homosexuality, a process that functions to shape her mother role and confirm, at least to herself, her heterosexuality. By consistently denouncing her sexually deviant acts, she reaffirms the heteronormative matrix that keeps her perpetually in the very mother role that she longs to escape.

As we see by the end of the book, however, the alternative mother figure who pursues her desires cannot exist because of the strength of gendered regulations that struggle to define the true mother. Ellie is overcome with guilt and "what if's" throughout the entire affair with Missy so much so that after Missy has moved on, she begs for her husband to forgive her and take her back. She decides that her involvement with Missy was superficial, risky, and bound to fail. In this way, the deviant mother figure ultimately serves to strengthen the heterosexist matrix of power that enables traditional gendered expectations of the mother. The mother is most happy within her nuclear family structure where her role is clearly defined by society. She knows what is expected of her; she knows how to perform this mother role, even if it fails to meet her sexual desires. Ultimately, Ellie could not conceive of how to incorporate Missy and deviant desires into her role as mother and this uncertainty decides her fate as she reconnects with her husband and children at the end of the book.

Peter is able to accept Ellie back because he does not recognize her sexual adventure with Missy as a legitimate affair—to really qualify as a significant affair, it would have needed to be between Ellie and another man. Her relationship with Missy is effectively dismissed by Peter,

downplaying its significance and its threat to heterosexual coupledness. Such an ending normalizes heterosexual relationships as the locus of true love, effectively silencing the intense emotions felt in the lesbian affair. Again, the rhetoric of choice is employed to emphasize Ellie's decision to adopt the role of the "good mother" and decide against the lesbian identity because it remains undefined, dangerous, and unacceptable in society. Such complicity, however, as Butler reminds us, not only continues participation in the heterosexist matrix, but it also implies an acceptance of these regulations. When Mommy Lit heroines succumb to dominant representations of the mother figure, they ultimately reinforce these gendered norms. Furthermore, tying motherhood so closely to biological motherhood, in that one cannot be fulfilled in a marriage without pursuing biological motherhood, is an extremely limiting view of motherhood. The genre does not do justice to the diverse realities of motherhood that we see today including lesbian motherhood, issues with women having babies at older ages, and women having babies within communities where relationships other than mother/child will factor significantly into the child's life. Additionally, as hooks notes, by not allowing women to choose not to have children, the novels suggest that "it [bearing children] is more important than women's other labor and more rewarding" (136). Despite how the subgenre seems to safeguard understandings of motherhood within the heteronormative matrix and within biological conceptions of motherhood, the moments of resistance where heroines question the viability of such a way of conceptualizing motherhood suggest that motherhood is indeed invented, maintained, and reproduced.

I have here attempted to illustrate various methods of resistance that Mommy Lit texts employ to address dominant ideologies of motherhood as expressed mostly in popular media and by other key characters in the texts. By focusing on the difficulties women face in locating and

demonstrating maternal genes, and justifying and pursuing acts of sexual deviance, the texts highlight the performative qualities of motherhood. Performing gender is a subversive activity in Butler's mind that reveals the difficulty women have in achieving such idealized versions of motherhood and questions representations of motherhood as natural, fixed, or stable. While the dominant style of motherhood rehearsed and maintained in these texts is that attached to white, affluent women—a reality that elides discussions of how race and class impact styles of motherhood—the author's and heroines' strategies of resistance are telling in that they highlight the political function of the narratives to normalize white femininity. The inability to envision alternative styles of mothering, and the stark reality the narratives create regarding how intensely dominant motherhood is policed, is unsettling in the end. Similar to how this chapter has discussed the strict gendered norms that inform intelligibility in terms of motherhood, I turn now to the last chapter in the hope that I can give more voice to issues of race and class within the genre of Chick Lit. My analysis in Chapter Five further develops this idea of how strict cultural and racialized norms instantiate certain gendered and cultural performances. I look here at how the subgenre of Chica Lit also presents methods of resistance by illuminating for the reader how these cultural norms prevent critical gendered identities from being recognized.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ‘NOT LATINA ENOUGH’: THE POLITICS OF RACE AND CLASS IN CHICA LIT

When Alicia Valdes-Rodriguez’ first time novel *The Dirty Girls Social Club* successfully negotiated a \$500,000 book deal with St. Martin’s Press back in 2003, the Chica Lit industry was born. Persuaded by Valdes-Rodriguez, who says she wrote her book for “a mainstream American audience [so that they could] understand the diversity of the modern Latina experience,” St. Martin’s acquiesced to the deal, declaring it a future success with “a large American audience” (Mulligan). Described as “a largely untapped young market,” St. Martin’s has since printed 310,000 copies in English and 32,000 in Spanish to reach both an English-speaking and Spanish-speaking audience. Valdes-Rodriguez’ book is often referred to as the trailblazing book for Chica Lit, just as Terry McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* is often referred to as the catalyst text for Sistah Lit. Chica Lit is a burgeoning subgenre of Chick Lit that aims to appeal not only to the growing middle-class Latina demographic, but also to women of several racial and cultural backgrounds. The market for Chica Lit is hot right now—as evidenced by the recent creation of several publisher imprints devoted entirely to contemporary Latina fiction, such as HarperCollins’ Avon Books. In response to the astounding success of the subgenre, Chica Lit author Mary Castillo noted: “If readers look at characters who are maybe like them but of a different ethnicity, and they can relate to those characters, then you have a great combination” (Simhan). While some of the authors tend to oversimplify the aims of ethnic Chick Lit books--often reiterating the idea that the books diversify the portrayal of ethnic experience in literature, or that they illustrate the life of the mainstreamed ethnic American who cannot “quote a single Han Dynasty proverb,” for



example, but can “recite entire dialogues from numerous ‘Brady Bunch’ episodes”—a closer examination of Chica Lit reveals much more at work (Simhan).

Chica Lit authors explore the complications of living a bi-cultural identity amid pressures to conform to the (over)professionalized lifestyle exhibited by most of Chick Lit’s white heroines. In doing this, the authors deepen understandings of how race, class, and culture impact and shape this identity, as well as draw attention to a performance of white femininity that assumes a social reality unaffected by race or economics. By infusing their texts with heroines whose lives and identities are constantly punctured by social realities tied to gender, racial, and cultural expectations, the novelists subvert the ability for Chick Lit books to satisfy readers by simplifying or ignoring issues of race or culture. The books uncover what lies beneath the Chick Lit narrative and reveal how middle-class Latinas grapple with 21<sup>st</sup>-century expectations to succeed in their professional lives and adopt mainstream standards of success while maintaining ties to cultural traditions. A predominant desire among many Chica Lit writers is to generate dialogue among a broad readership that crosses race lines; as a result, the novels often accommodate (usually white) readers by educating them on the complex identities of Latinas. In contrast to the Chick Lit novels examined earlier that equated choice with will and determination, Chica Lit proves that the “choices” heroines make are often difficult decisions impacted by external forces of cultural and economic imperialism. Here, authors stress how heroines perform “choices” in the same Butlerian sense that people perform gender (and racial identities)—namely, only in so much as restrictive cultural norms allow.

In attaching notions of choice to restrictive cultural norms determined by social location, Chica Lit jettisons the notion of choices as simple acts of determination. The authors also, in their portrayals of the heroines and their challenges, work to unearth and rupture the social norms

that restrict one's gendered and/or raced person from being recognized by society—a process that causes social death, according to Butler. Although the narratives tend in some ways to embrace modes of agency tied to the white mainstream ideals of beauty and success we have witnessed in previous Chick Lit texts, authors emphasize how the strict limits of cultural norms available to the protagonists impact these decisions. Achieving livability for the marginalized subject “not immediately captured or legitimated by the available norms” is of primary concern in these texts (Butler, *The Reader* 3). I position this as my last chapter in the dissertation because the subgenre of Chica Lit—in how it adapts and complicates narrative elements and methods of resistance found in more traditional, white Chick Lit—extends my argument that Chick Lit as a popular genre is indeed “open to contestations and recodifications which can become sites of resistance” (Alarcón 380). While the narrative seems to accommodate the (potentially white?) reader by embracing and normalizing to some extent goals of success and beauty seen in the more mainstream white Chick Lit texts, tensions regarding how Latina identity is negotiated and what is at risk in this negotiation remain unresolved at the end of the texts. Desires are temporarily mollified in an effort to sugarcoat a narrative that brings up more questions than it can answer regarding the disturbing effects of hegemonic cultural norms that limit the social livability of “others.” Chica Lit raises questions about what is at stake in the quest to achieve (over)professional urban female agency by highlighting how heroines perform whiteness and “Latina-ness” and how they struggle to negotiate traditional cultural customs or expectations with white mainstream culture.

I begin this chapter with a short discussion of Caridad Piñeiro's *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* because it narrates the cultural tensions bi-cultural subjects may feel in their quests to succeed professionally in contemporary American urban society. Negotiating mainstream white

American values with cultural or familial expectations proves both difficult and telling as the heroines exhibit desires of achieving agency and balance in their lives similar to the kind white middle-class heroines yearn for in the books examined previously. There is, in these books, a strong desire to distance women's professional success from definitions of whiteness, which is to say that the authors portray ethnic heroines with similar aims and definitions of success and beauty as the white heroines in the previously discussed books, but that quest has been reconfigured--repackaged--as a specific act of ethnic agency. What are the effects of this? While the authors argue this to be a strategy of resistance--a viable method of reclaiming Latina identity to some extent--we are constantly reminded of the bleak reality most Latinas face. Among others, Chicana feminist thinker Norma Alarcón has time and again documented how "most of these women have been (and continue to be) the surplus sources of cheap labor in the field, the canneries, the *maquiladora* border industries, and domestic service" (375). This chapter, then, examines how the authors open up a dialogue about race and class that does not address this majority and argues that such a discussion, for what it reveals about the stronghold the dominant class holds on "others", can be subversive.

In 1987, Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa argued that a critical framework was necessary for Chicanas and other U.S. third world feminists to "develo[p] subjectivity capable of transformation and relocation, movement guided by the learned capacity to read, renovate, and make signs on behalf of the dispossessed" (qtd. in Sandoval, "Mestizaje as Method" 359). For Anzaldúa, the bicultural female subject living "between races, nations, languages, genders, sexualities, and cultures" in a "vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" becomes empowered by embracing multiple, fragmentary, and at times contested identities—a practice she terms *mestiza consciousness*, or the consciousness of the

“mixed blood” (Sandoval "Mestizaje as Method" 359; Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 25 and 101). What we see in both *South Beach Chicas* and *Dirty Girls* are attempts to reach this empowered state of consciousness, or “resistant ideology” (Sandoval, "Mestizaje as Method" 360). Attaining success in these books is dependent upon recognizing and reconciling the importance of family and cultural values. *South Beach Chicas* explores how women incorporate cultural values and expectations into their lives, and, in so doing, draw attention to the isolated nature of the performance of white femininity that we see in mainstream white Chick Lit texts. Achieving agency in these latter texts usually occurs entirely outside of a community, familial structure, or real political reality; the heroines are often portrayed as existing outside of social realities. Reliance solely on the isolated urban family so popularized by the hit T.V. show “Friends” is all that is needed. In *South Beach Chicas*, however, the author emphasizes the role social location plays in shaping more complicated cultural identities influenced by vectors of race and class. Heroines find ways to embrace aspects of their home culture and reconcile conflicting tensions thrust upon them by dominant white society. They, in effect, adapt, persevere, and critique the dominant culture’s rules, norms, influences, and expectations.

Valdes-Rodriguez’ text provides the best platform for discussing how race and class issues in contemporary Chick Lit can be explored. This text, written by an award-winning journalist for *L.A. Times* and the *Boston Globe* known for engaging contemporary issues facing Latina communities and identities, assumes its reader to be the stereotypical Chick Lit reader—a white woman with financial means who remains fairly unconcerned with (and/or ignorant of?) political or societal issues. Regarding her audience, Valdes-Rodriguez has commented that whether they speak English or Spanish, live in the U.S. or Spain, her readers “tend to be young, educated professional women who love clothes, apple martinis, and sex” (Mulligan). Framing

her narrative in this way allows Valdes-Rodriguez to make humorous and cutting comments to the reader unfamiliar with the diverse realities of Latina identities. She blends pop culture references with “the rhythm of a hip Latin lifestyle” in order to appeal to mainstream America and to ensure that “any U.S. reader unfamiliar with the Latin world will not feel left out” (Mulligan). Portraying characters of various races, religions, and backgrounds, the novel digs deep into the messy realities and anxieties regarding the role skin color, class position, sexual relations and orientations play within Latina communities and American society more broadly. The novel criticizes the role the media plays in perpetuating narrow stereotypes of Latino culture and regulating cultural norms tied to gender, race, and culture. The media is, paradoxically, both source of income and prosperity even as it is the root cause of exploitation that leads to the demise of several of the characters. Valdes-Rodriguez indicts the reader at times for her ignorance on aspects of American history and cultural awareness. But this is all done with a good dose of humor. Following closely on the heels of other contemporary Chicana writers who use humor in their novels to elucidate tensions of racial and class struggle, Valdes-Rodriguez participates in what is usually referred to as “the Chicana Renaissance” that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s in response to the concerns of minority women feeling their concerns were unmet by the growing Chicano movement or Anglo feminist groups.<sup>19</sup> Among other new literary norms, humor is a common narrative element found in many Chicana literary texts today. So while Chica Lit has clear connections to mainstream Chick Lit, its ties to contemporary Chicana Lit are also clear. Unlike Chick Lit texts discussed previously here, humor in *Dirty Girls* has a heightened function—namely to complicate readers’ understandings of middle-class professional Latina identities and reveal the anxieties that surface as a result of performing “Latina-ness” and whiteness within the limited cultural norms available to

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<sup>19</sup> See Deborah Madsen’s *Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature*.

interpreting the intelligibility of the characters. Valdes-Rodriguez has noted that the purpose of her writing is to “find a way to address serious historical issues through chick lit” (Mulligan).

Of most interest to my study here is how *Dirty Girls* illuminates the strict social norms available to these Latina women. Each character performs a version of Latina identity that is policed in some way by mainstream American society, and the overall goal for each character seems to become one of acquiring wealth, success, and happiness in much the same fashion as the mainstream white Chick Lit texts. Interestingly, however, the models of success that we usually see tied to mainstream ruling class ideals is reformulated here as an act of ethnic agency so that the Latina characters who do not abide by mainstream goals and definitions of success are ridiculed and, ultimately, made to conform. The idea that, when success is dissociated from whiteness and reconfigured as a Latina goal and characteristic, is unsettling both because it-- while attempting to broaden understanding of Latina identity--risks essentializing the Latina woman as belonging only to the middle class, *and* because it further naturalizes and strengthens a construction of whiteness that gains power by remaining invisible. So while the narrative is rather neatly resolved by affirming in the reader a sense that these characters have achieved (over)professionalized lives, its shortcomings arise as a result of embracing, to some extent, the same goals, expectations, and prejudices placed on them by dominant society. I look, then, rather closely at how the text treats characters who reject the definition of success as it is professed here and analyze how their treatment by the author reveals an intense anxiety over what role Latinas should play, what models are acceptable to follow, and what's at stake for venturing outside of clearly defined roles for achieving success. Ultimately, the novel in the end proves that it is too difficult to escape the hegemonic forces imposed by the dominant class. It is nearly impossible to carve out an alternate space unaffected by hegemonic ideologies that subordinate the “other.” An

attempt is made at appropriation, at negotiation, at performance--to learn the language, goals, behavior of the oppressor and use it to the heroines' advantage. This seems a commendable effort, but one not without its share of limitations and dangerous implications.

*Sex and the South Beach Chicas: Reconciling Familial and Cultural Expectations*

Sonia Singh, author of *Goddess for Hire*, explains how she can't relate to much of the contemporary literary fiction that relays Indian experience: "Every book I read with Indian characters was always serious, heavy stuff . . . I wanted to do something mainstream and funny . . . like average Americans who just happen to be of Indian descent" (Simhan). While one of the reasons authors give for writing ethnic Chick Lit stems from a desire to diversify the portrayal of ethnic experience in literature—to illustrate the life of the mainstreamed ethnic American, for example—it is also to tell somewhat of a different story. When asked how ethnic Chick Lit books differ from mainstream Chick Lit, Mary Castillo (author of *Hot Tamara* and other Chica Lit books) replied: "the family is always involved somehow . . . in the ethnic books. They're [the heroines] trying to balance their ethnicity and being American" (Tulabut). Originally from Cuba, Caridad Piñeiro has first-hand knowledge of the difficulties encountered while attempting to fit into mainstream professional American life. After earning her law degree from St. John's University, she became both the first female and first Latino partner at a prestigious law firm. Both Castillo and Piñeiro contributed a story to the Latina Chick Lit anthology credited with spearheading the Chica Lit subgenre entitled *Friday Night Chicas: Sexy Stories from La Noche*. I look here at Piñeiro's most popular novel because it comments on the performance of white femininity that we see in most mainstream white Chick Lit texts and explores how familial

expectations texture urban realities for the Latina heroines. By focusing on the demands familial, community, and cultural expectations and traditions place on the heroines, *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* complicates the image of the white, privileged woman isolated from social realities punctured by race, culture, or class differences who embraces solely the urban family.

Piñeiro's title is a spirited spin-off of Candace Bushnell's highly popularized *Sex and The City* series--which continued to dazzle fans with the release of the *Sex and the City* movie in 2007. Her *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* aims to bring Latina voices to the predominantly white sea of Chick Lit. The author successfully reveals the tension and conflicts that arise when women with more intimate ties to cultural roots and expectations attempt to navigate contemporary professional urban American realities. While Piñeiro's heroines have similar goals of agency to many of the Chick Lit heroines examined earlier, the author complicates how feasible this agency is, drawing attention to what is sacrificed, lost, or compromised in the end as a result of conforming to the goals of mainstream white American values. Such a negotiation entails the rupturing of some existing social norms in an effort to extend the definition of Latina and the achievement of "livability" in a Butlerian sense.

Unlike most of Chick Lit's white heroines, Tori, Juli, Sylvia, and Adriana have complicated and intimate connections with their families—relationships accompanied by cultural expectations the heroines must negotiate throughout the book. All four heroines, being of Cuban-American descent and inhabiting the culturally diverse border space location of Miami, are presented as struggling against familial cultural expectations in an effort to achieve agency. They are, effectively, caught in the perplexing dilemma Tori's friend calls "the whole Cuban gotta-be-successful theme"--which Tori describes as a generation expected to be successful by white standards (as many of the parents remind the heroines that they did not have as many



opportunities) *and* capable of preserving some cultural traditions (Piñeiro 144). Their quest for agency, then, is both a class struggle within the Latina community and a striving for mainstream (over)professionalized success as illustrated by the Chick Lit genre. Tori's goal is to marry a man not of her parent's choosing--but her own--and to resist cultural and gendered expectations put on her by her family to have an elaborate engagement and wedding, events she refers to as "all those conventions and the problems they wrought" (Piñeiro 2). She also aims to differentiate herself from her "*telenovela*-watching, stay-at-home, making-babies *hermanita*," who she views as too complacent with traditional values and, hence, unsuccessful (Piñeiro 9). Tori exhibits confusion at the beginning of the story over her family's expectations for her, confessing to her friends: "All my life my family has pushed for me to make them proud, and here I am—successful and happy—and what do they say?" (Piñeiro 9). While she worked very hard in school and ultimately received a law degree, she feels she won't fully satisfy her mother's wishes until she settles down with a man of the family's choosing and engages in traditional ceremonies and events to commemorate this accomplishment.

From the start of the book, Tori and the other heroines embody the kind of *mestiza consciousness* Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa argues is necessary to negotiating bi-cultural identity in in-between and border spaces between the U.S. and Latin America. The Borderlands, as a location that refuses stasis and instead embraces a topography of displacement—"a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary . . . a constant state of transition"—is, for Anzaldúa, an unstable, yet productive, place from which the bicultural subject can speak (Anzaldúa, Borderlands 25). Because the *New Mestiza* inhabits the overlapping spaces of dominant American culture and a different cultural space—each with a different set of values and expectations—she must cope by "developing a tolerance for

contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” within a “plural personality” where “nothing is thrown out” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 101). In a Q & A section at the very end of *South Beach Chicas*, Piñeiro tells her readers that she left Cuba when she was very young because her mother “was a very political creature and it would have been difficult for her to stay uninvolved” (“Up Close and Personal”). Therefore, her parents moved the family to Long Island in order to distance themselves from the politics of Cuba. Piñeiro reminisces: “I go to Miami instead of the Cuba I can’t visit. It’s where I get my fill of all things Cuban” (“Up Close and Personal”). The place the heroines inhabit is unstable and fraught with social realities stemming from familial expectations to settle down and raise children amid mainstream societal pressures to succeed in one’s career. All four heroines struggle throughout the book to accommodate familial and cultural expectations with their quests for agency. Such a plotline differs from the mainstream white Chick Lit novel because it demonstrates how cultural pressures tied to both gender and ethnicity complicate the heroine’s understanding of success and agency. Tori, Juli, Sylvia, and Ariana complicate the image of Carrie Bradshaw by adding into the mix demanding mothers who want both “more” for their daughters but also expect them to abide by certain traditions. *South Beach Chicas* illustrates some very real social tensions that are largely absent from the Chick Lit books I’ve examined earlier. It is notably progressive in how it exposes the impossibility of achieving the models of white femininity seen throughout the Chick Lit genre exactly because most women face challenges tied to racial, cultural, or familial tensions that prohibit them from living Carrie Bradshaw’s life.

Throughout the book, when faced with tense familial situations Tori calls “inquisitions,” where she has the potential to choose something other than what her family would advocate or approve of, she whispers her personal mantra to herself. Should she be “toe the line Tori” or dare

to assert her personal will and become “take charge Tori”? (Piñeiro 23 and 24) Maintaining ties with her family is positioned in this novel as a disempowered state, while making choices that go against family and cultural traditions and instead embrace more mainstream white American models of success are advanced as acts of agency. Her struggle to choose between the two and the courage she must muster up to do so reveals that such choices are not always easy or possible. More often than not, for these Chica Lit heroines, choices are bound up in pressures made by family and community. Nearly made nauseous by the thought of announcing her love for Gill to her family and their plans to have a small, private ceremony, Tori (a tough lawyer in her professional life) fears she will greatly disappoint them. Far from “silenc[ing] the mami inquisition,” bringing home a man, for Tori, requires a great act of courage—one that she also needs to muster up to confront her friends with the news (Piñeiro 9). Underlying the strong friendship between the four Latina women is a commitment to each other and a solid understanding that relationships with men often break up, hinder, or prevent the women from maintaining close ties with each other. When asked what her reason was for writing this book, Piñeiro replied: “I realized that my friends and I were all going through similar experiences . . . as we married, had kids, invested time in our careers, etc., our relationships with everyone around us changed. Sometimes the friendships disappeared, which was sad” (“Up Close and Personal”). These friendships have the added threat of being punctured not only by realities of kids, careers, and love interests, but also by family traditions and cultural expectations.

Sylvia’s fears about Tori’s choice of a man communicate the tension that abounds in this book regarding what role marriage or commitment to men plays in distancing women from both other women and from cultural or familial roots. She prays that Tori decides against the commitment to Gil, that her choice will be, instead, “wiser” (Piñeiro 17). To back up her

opinion, she asserts: “Women who somehow deluded themselves into believing in such impossible dreams . . . invariably found themselves miserable and lonely” (Piñeiro 17). Sensing her friends’ hesitation at the idea of marrying Gil, Tori confronts her friends: “I can see that you all think that if I marry Gil, I’ll escape to the suburbs of Kendall, bear a brood of kids, and forget that I was ever your friend” (Piñeiro 12). In this text, choosing a man is more than a simple act of choice. Choosing a man is, for Tori, an act of resistance against a family who wants to have a say in who she marries and her friends, who want her to remain single and part of their urban family forever. When Tori announces their engagement and plans to marry in six months to her mother, she uses very assertive language that indicates this is an empowering move for her:

‘Mi’jita, are you getting sick?’

‘Si, mami. I’m sick of all this talk when Gil and I have made ourselves clear.’

Her mami immediately protested. ‘But mi’jita—’

‘No buts, Mami. The wedding will be in six months—’

‘But people will think—’

Tori cut her mother off with a slash of her hand. ‘I don’t care what people will think.’

Stunned silence followed that pronouncement. Flushed with success, Tori inched her chin up rebelliously, and slowly and carefully made their announcement once more. (Piñeiro 32)

Amid accusations from her friends that she will desert them, Tori’s task is to reassure her friends that her loyalty to them is uncompromised. Likewise, she must convince her mother that she is indeed successful and that marrying Gil will not change this. Occupants of this borderspace who have multiple, at times conflicting, demands on their identities--for one, a mainstream American

society that often prizes and reinforces social agendas that run counter to the ones valued by homespace communities--need to remain flexible and open to conceiving of ways that “subordinated subjects under various conditions of domination and subordination” can prosper (Sandoval, "U.S. Third World Feminism" 16). Although it may not seem like much, the act of choosing Gil is Tori’s way of seeking survival and happiness amid pressures to remain single from her friends and to conform to gendered expectations from her family. The book highlights the struggle she goes through to accomplish this quest, in the process drawing attention to how meaningful and fraught with difficulty it is. Complicating choice in this way—and tying it to the feelings of disappointment and loss Tori feels as she temporarily loses all of her girlfriends as a consequence of her “choice”—gives insight into how truly difficult “choice,” as it’s made out to be in more mainstream Chick Lit books, can really be.

In drawing attention to Latina-specific cultural and familial tensions and the impact these have on the heroine’s search for agency and success, *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* comments on the tendency white Chick Lit has to keep whiteness unmarked. Rebecca Aanerud states that “white writers are more likely to assume whiteness as a (non)racial norm” and are also more likely to present whiteness as “unraced”—a narrative act that effectively silences how the “construction of whiteness depends on dynamic social, political, and historical factors” (37). Piñeiro’s work here challenges the way in which white authors continue to “colonise the definition of normal” by leaving white domination unmarked (Aanerud 37). In marking her characters and drawing attention to the tensions that arise as a result of cultural difference, she effectively marks the white femininity of the broader Chick Lit genre. In showing not only Tori, but Juli as well, as a woman who struggles to accommodate cultural traditions with quests for agency and success, who risks much to negotiate white mainstream models of femininity with

cultural expectations expounded by the mother, Piñeiro makes clearer the existing social norms available to the heroines.

Juli admires how “glamorous” and “sexy” the lead women characters in *telenovelas* are—a reality she immediately contrasts to her self-described present state of “drab as a kitchen mouse” (Piñeiro 38). Similar to other Chick Lit heroines who undergo a beautification process that involves new clothes, makeup, hair, and a refined “take charge” attitude, the more fashionable Adriana eventually takes Juli under her wing and spruces her up. However, it isn’t until Juli reconciles with her mother’s history and beliefs that she achieves success in this novel. Like Tori, Juli’s mother has certain expectations of her—namely that Juli would accomplish more than being a servant in the “fine kitchens of Miami’s elite” (Piñeiro 36). Because Juli’s mother had always worked for wealthy white families as a cook where she had observed rowdy or outspoken domestic help get fired or mistreated, she has always taught Juli to “be like a quiet little mouse” so as not to get in trouble in her place of employment (Piñeiro 36). As Juli explains, “cook” was like “a four-letter word” to her *mami*, who continues to misunderstand Juli’s position of chef and boss at the restaurant she co-owns with Adriana (Piñeiro 227). Juli explains: “[My] mami had told [me] that she’d cooked too many meals and washed too many dishes to see [me] end up doing the same thing for the rest of [my] life” (Piñeiro 227). Agency for Juli is again defined as standing up to her mother, as she tells herself: “maybe you could develop a similar backbone and show your mami that you don’t just work in the kitchen, you own it! The little voice inside her head chastised” (Piñeiro 37). Her quest throughout the book, then, becomes to show her mother that she is accomplished, that just because she gave up a teaching career to become a chef, does not mean she is someone’s servant. Interestingly, Juli’s confidence level is tied directly to her mother’s approval of her occupation. Even when Adriana convinces her to

undergo a makeover of new hair, makeup, and clothes--a process that leaves Juli sporting “a new, sexy swagger in her step”-- it isn’t until she agrees to ask her mom to help in the kitchen and to use some of the family recipes that have “kept the family’s histories and traditions alive” and “birthed in her the love of cooking and the desire to spread those traditions through her art” that she becomes truly happy (Piñeiro 193 and 227).

Near the end of the book when Juli asks her mom to take a significant role in her kitchen, her mother realizes that Juli is indeed the boss of the kitchen. It is Juli’s reliance on her mother to direct others in the kitchen and provide the family recipes for her restaurant *and*, subsequently, her mother’s revelation that Juli has honored her and the family by accomplishing the level of success she has that closes Juli’s story. Similar to how Juli includes her mother in her professional life, Tori concedes to allowing her mother to have a wedding celebration that includes “most of Little Havana” (Piñeiro 243). The two have their first heart-to-heart conversation, and Tori’s mother confesses that she always thought Tori worked too hard, to which Tori responds: “But that’s what you wanted. You wanted me to be successful” (Piñeiro 249). When her mother suggests that Tori didn’t seem happy single and working at the law firm, Tori clarifies: “I wasn’t unhappy, but I wasn’t happy either . . . It’s like I was on a treadmill and I wasn’t falling off, but I wasn’t gaining ground either. Even after making partner, I was just stuck running in place” (Piñeiro 249). What allows her to “spee[d] along” now is both her choice of Gil and her reconciling with her mother. Reconciling relationships with mothers who represent familial and cultural roots adds another dimension to the Butlerian concept of livability, in that survival—averting social death—is defined by one’s ability to come to terms with one’s cultural history. Decisions to rebuild cultural histories (as Juli does by using her mother’s recipes--which go back for generations, or Tori’s decision to embrace the kind of cultural celebration her family

values) become part of the quest for agency. At the same time that the books call into question a messier reality for Latinas influenced by cultural tensions, they highlight the relative ease with which white heroines ascend the ladder of success.

The focus on the collective here, in opposition to the individual, and the ability to navigate two different cultures successfully is a good working example of Chela Sandoval's theory of the "oppositional consciousness"--which operates as "a kinetic motion that maneuvers, poetically transfigures, and orchestrates while demanding alienation, perversion, and reformation in both spectators and practitioners" ("U.S. Third World Feminism" 3). Sandoval's feminist consciousness acts as a kind of "tactical weaponry" in how it allows for movement between different methods of resistance that can function "within yet beyond the demands of dominant ideology" to ensure the postmodern bi-cultural subject the ability to add and edit histories of tradition and culture within mainstream American life ("U.S. Third World Feminism" 3). Sandoval's method of resistance proposes a way to theorize the way ethnic women writers experience and respond to dominant American culture. This "requisite for survival" contributes to a postmodernist aesthetic characterized broadly by "crumbling traditions, values, and cultural institutions of the West" by placing importance on how the contemporary professional Latina can reclaim buried or unacknowledged cultural histories in an empowering way (Sandoval, "U.S. Third World Feminism 10).

The Risks of Performing "Latina-ness" in *The Dirty Girls Social Club*

*The Dirty Girls Social Club* reveals intense anxieties related to issues of culture, race, class, and the complex role the media plays in disseminating understandings of these issues. By



focusing on the diverse methods of, and reasons for, performing “Latina-ness,” Valdes-Rodriguez uncovers the limits set by the hegemonic social norms that function to interpret and define identity. Butler contends that to extend the definition of the human, “so that subjects who do not conform to its heteronormative, racialized imperatives need no longer suffer the violence of social exclusion,” one must draw attention to the limits currently in place that govern social livability (Butler, *The Reader* 3). In drawing attention to the limited mainstream understandings of Latina culture and detailing how six Latina women respond to such definitions, Valdes-Rodriguez spurs questions of how a Latina identity that adheres to cultural forces imposed by the dominant class is policed, reinforced, and rewarded. In their varied performances of “Latina-ness,” the characters display the cultural norms responsible for the stereotypes and question the cultural and economic imperialism of dominant American culture that proves to be both the root cause of violence against some of the characters as well as the source of income and professional success. Such a treatment of Latina culture--especially in how the characters are ultimately unable to step outside of the norms--exposes the strict limits of acceptable gendered and racial identities and draws the reader into further contemplation about the potentially liberating act of rupturing the existing norms.

*Dirty Girls* tells the story of six wealthy Latina women who graduated from Boston University together and promised to meet every year in celebration of their ongoing *Buena Sucia Social Club*. The women are of different racial and religious backgrounds, but all are significantly wealthy and most make their living from jobs in media relations. The novel goes into the different backgrounds of each character and their past and present complications with professional life and duty, love interests, and family life. Valdes-Rodriguez begins the novel by positioning the reader as a white non-Latina, a narrative move that allows Lauren, the chief

narrator, to act as cultural informant. She speaks directly to the reader on several occasions to draw attention to the reader's unfamiliarity with Latina identity:

A lot of you probably don't speak Spanish, and so don't know what the hell a '*sucia*' is. That's okay. No, really. Some of us *sucias* can't speak Spanish either . . . You might have imagined by now—thanks to TV and Hollywood—that a *sucia* is something beautiful and curvy and foreign, something really super Latina, you know, like . . . a treasured recipe from a short, fat, wrinkled old *abuelita* who works erotic magic with chocolate and all her secret herbs and spices while the mariachis wail . . . Get freaking over it, lames. It's, like, so *not*. (Valdes-Rodriguez 4-5)

Addressing the reader this way functions to establish the author's credibility as an inside voice on the complexities of Latina culture and the reader as the one who needs to be informed. This kind of narrative technique that builds trust in the author and communicates a candid tone is common to all of Chick Lit, but here the narrator assumes a more elevated and informed position—something we don't necessarily see in more traditional Chick Lit. By implying that her reader is white and by vowing to educate her about the diverse identity of Latinas, the author aims to open a cultural dialogue that relies on the selective use of humor.

Lauren, the lead heroine, is the voice of the author here and many times throughout the beginning pages her aim seems to be to educate the ignorant reader with side comments in parentheses: "(yes, we Latinas come in 'Jew,' too—shame on *you* for being surprised) . . . she's shouting in Puerto Rican Spanish (yes, there's a difference)" (Valdes-Rodriguez 11-12). These biting comments, though informative and direct, are sprinkled with humor and are light in nature. They reveal a narrative voice that isn't merely attempting to entertain, but to inform as well.

Mary Castillo's earlier contention that ethnic Chick Lit is most successful when it can appeal to various audiences is confirmed by Valdes-Rodriguez here as we see that the novel is actually geared toward the white non-Latina audience. By combining humor with cultural knowledge, the text has the potential to reach a broader audience—one not scared off by a work that is too difficult or too serious. Establishing this candid tone invites the reader to share in a story about the lives and challenges facing six Latina women who all struggle to step outside of current cultural norms that maintain stereotypes and class distinctions.

Lauren, whose father is from Cuba and whose mother is “white trash” (Lauren's own words) of the “bayou swamp monster” kind “with oil under [her] fingernails and a rusty olive-green washing machine in front of the double-wide,” is the only Hispanic columnist at the *Boston Gazette* (Valdes-Rodriguez 6). Masquerading as a “good Latina” who knows Spanish and who can, even though it angers her immensely, even direct an editor where to go to buy Mexican jumping beans, Lauren's performance of Latina-ness suggests that this definition of Latina is the only one available to her (Valdes-Rodriguez 6). Convinced she was hired by the *Gazette* to be “a red-hot-n'-spicy clichéd chili pepper-ish cross between Charo and Lois Lane,” she confides to the reader and her friends that she is a “fraud” and that she “wanted that gig so bad [she] would have tried speaking Mandarin” (Valdes-Rodriguez 6). Having told the *Gazette*, as she puts it to the reader, “Si, si, *I will be your spicy Carmen Miranda. I will dance the lambada in your dismal gray broadsheet,*” Lauren solidifies the performance of her ethnic identity by knowingly decorating her desk in a manner that marks her as stereotypically “Latina”: “[it is] draped in Mexican rugs and Santeria beads just to scare everyone. It's like a gigantic wedding cake stuck in the middle of the newsroom . . . La Virgen de Guadalupe stands at attention on top of my computer terminal, with the brass handles of a broken clock poking out of her navel” (Valdes-

Rodriguez 103). The descriptions of what Lauren does to accomplish her Latina performance are over the top, sprinkled with humor, and chock full of wit and sarcasm; such a portrayal suggests both the limits of the current social norms available to interpret the Latina identity and the heroine's ability to mock this stereotype and indict the racism she experiences from those around her.

One of the goals of the book seems to be to dispel the notion of race as a defining factor of Latina identity. Throughout the book, Lauren's ethnic identity is constantly in question as the lightness of her skin causes confusion for people accustomed to defining Latina as brown-skinned. When her darker-complexioned friend Usnavys calls her out on her lighter skin and insinuates that she doesn't know enough about the Latino culture embodied by Lauren's new love interest, Amaury--who sells drugs to support his family but tells people he works as a janitor--Lauren responds: "You don't think I'm a Latina? Why, just because I'm light? You think you have to grow up in the projects to be a Latina?" (Valdes-Rodriguez 147). Later, one of Amaury's older relatives listens to Lauren's Spanish and asks: "You American?" to which Lauren uncomfortably replies "My dad is from Cuba,' [. . .] in awkward, accented Spanish. I'm a Latina," a response that incites laughter from both Amaury and the older female relative (Valdes-Rodriguez 283). Here Valdes-Rodriguez reveals the convoluted role race plays in defining Latina identity. While Lauren wants to believe that the color of one's skin should not preclude one from being accepted into one ethnic category or another, that the presence of lighter or darker skin should have no bearing on how Latina one is, at several other points in the text she notes how light skin is valued within both the Latina/o community and Cuban communities. Her physical characteristics fall outside the social norm that traps expressions of Latina identity and, by drawing attention to the difficulty she experiences in claiming a Latina identity, the author

questions these “attendant norms of recognition” available to a woman like Lauren. If, in a Butlerian sense, survival means social acceptance and living a life that has political significance (rather than just physical), Lauren’s “choice” to play the dark-skinned stereotypic Latina is representative of “the corporeal process of interpretation within a network of deeply entrenched cultural norms” (Butler, *The Reader* 23). Her performance is both indicative of the strict limits set for interpreting the Latina body even as it adds to and strengthens these norms.

While the author draws attention to the limits of racial stereotypes and the norms established to maintain these, she also seems committed to distancing Latina identity from lower or working class backgrounds. In effect, it is in disassociating Latina identity from working-class realities *or* stereotypes--in an effort to complicate mainstream America’s understanding of Latina identity--that allows the author to re-package agency as a quest to achieve many of the same indicators of urban success exemplified in white Chick Lit texts. In this manner, economic success is no longer an indicator or component of whiteness; it is re-formulated here as a specific act of ethnic agency. Lauren notes several times throughout the narrative that those women like Usnavys, who grew up in poverty in Puerto Rico, are justified in gloating over the large sums of money they have acquired. In other words, this goal for economic wealth and (over)professionalized success is divorced from whiteness and made to be a logical and commendable goal for having experienced disempowerment and socio-economic disadvantage. Seen in this new light, the six women function as model figures for the Latina reader perhaps coming from such a situation or the white non-Latina reader who needs to be educated on the aims and desires of the middle-class Latina demographic.

Lauren’s intentional acts to present herself as the stereotypical Latina who eats a “breakfast of mango and papaya—heyyyyy Macarena, a’ight!” or behaves like “those frisky

Latina lawyers having orgasms while they shampoo their hair in court on the network TV ads” are, as she calls them, “pretend”; yet she succumbs to these roles so as to gain access to professional advancement and career recognition (Valdes-Rodriguez 11 and 103). Her playing at “Latina-ness” draws attention to the performative quality of ethnic gendered identity and necessitates a more serious consideration of what tensions these performances reveal. Judith Butler contends that one does not have agency over performing their gender—the meaning of the performance is not “established by the intention of the actor”—rather, the gender one performs is “conditioned by what is available for [one] to do within the culture and by what other practices are [ . . . ] legitimating” (Butler, The Reader 345). So, rather than an actor knowingly performing her gendered and/or cultural identity, Lauren is instead performing the cultural norms “that condition and limit the actor in the situation” (Butler, The Reader 345). Although Butler talks primarily about gender, she does discuss how “racial imperatives,” like expectations tied to gender expression, lead to a similar kind of “social exclusion” that the sexual minority experiences (Butler, The Reader 3). These are norms “by which humans’ lives are largely unavailable to groups such as gays, lesbians, transsexuals, racial minorities, and other others who are condemned to the social death of extra-normativity” (Butler, The Reader 3). Butler confirms that these “racial imperatives” act as “regulatory regimes” alongside heteronormative pressures to shape one’s gendered existence. Valdes-Rodriguez draws attention to the norms available to the Latina here--and arguably to Latinas in broader American mainstream society--by having Lauren perform them in order to advance her career. By playing the “authentic,” “good,” darker-skinned (she allows her complexion to be artificially darkened in a billboard) Latina who can speak Spanish (albeit poorly) and “represen[t] her people,” Lauren uncovers the “racialized imperatives” currently in place that seek to categorize the Latina in a certain way. The current

norms that shape understanding of Latina identity, as set forth by Valdes-Rodriguez, constrict it to necessarily immigrant and foreign, as well as working class. The author's aim, then, is to rupture these stereotypes and illuminate the complex life of the middle-class Latina identity.

Lauren's performance is particularly interesting in what it reveals about tensions surrounding class conflicts in Latina/o culture. Along with four other minorities at a *Gazette* meeting, she is asked to stand up to represent "the faces of the future of the *Gazette*" (Valdes-Rodriguez 6). While she detests the corporate push today to "diversify" staffs and workplaces because of its faulty reasoning that because she is Latina she is somehow very different from the other (white) employees, she goes along with the game. We see here a good example of how Lauren accepts the terms of the cultural norms prescribed to her by dominant society. Abiding by and even embellishing said limits of the narrow portrayal of the Latina paradoxically earns Lauren the most money and success in terms of her career. She is willing to play the part of the immigrant, un-Americanized Latina with special insider knowledge about Latino (here defined as Mexican American) culture if this will move her up the economic ladder. The narrative effectively communicates to the reader, via Lauren's confessional tone, her hatred of performing this Latina identity; therefore, when she goes overboard to pacify her boss' expectations to play this role, the text takes on a very humorous tone. Humor here is used to heighten awareness of the falsity under which Lauren must live in order to achieve the kind of success the white heroines in more mainstream Chick Lit achieve with far greater ease. The humor also functions to draw attention to the ridiculousness of the cultural norms in place that maintain this restrictive performance.

Going one step further, Lauren's humorous performance can be interpreted in terms of the "tactical weaponry" Chela Sandoval suggests is essential to building political agency for the

bicultural subject. Even though Lauren legitimates her performance by justifying her desire for money and career success, the reader sees what is at stake--what cultural norms one attempts to navigate in order to reach this desired state. Sandoval's "oppositional consciousness" method allows for feminist resistant movement within dominant ideologies. If abiding by the societal norms that influence and maintain (narrow and stereotypical) cultural understandings allows for increased agency for the subordinated subject on a more collective level, then such a performance is permitted. Of course it is arguable whether striving for greater professional success and individual economic gain can indeed be defined as political agency. Valdes-Rodriguez would say that it can be. Her book highlights six women who find their way up and out of oppression, discrimination, and/or poverty into the middle/upper class, who aim to heighten the status of Latinas everywhere because of it. She suggests that the individual gains of some Latinas elevate the status of Latinas everywhere by breaking down stereotypes that every Latina is necessarily poor, immigrant, and un-American. Similar to how more mainstream Chick Lit illuminates subversive moments where heroines struggle with the politics of assuming mainstream white femininity but ultimately folds back into dominant ideologies by the end of the text, Chica Lit also attempts to break down strict stereotypes of the Latina by writing against narratives that pathologize the poor, immigrant Mexican American woman. But this is not without great risk. Portraying the Latina as necessarily committed to achieving wealth and social prestige forces the heroine to subscribe to many of the attributes that mark wealth and success for mainstream white culture. This complicates the ability of the book to communicate progressive politics concerning the realities of race and class from within the genre of Chick Lit.

Butler's notion that "norms of reception"—or what conditions and understandings are available to an audience reading a gender performance—can produce "really interesting



problems of cultural translation and cultural misunderstanding” aids in the analysis of Valdes-Rodriguez’ narrative moves (Butler, The Reader 346). Because cultural norms can change and shift and influence gender performativity accordingly, Butler believes this can cause “massive cultural misunderstanding, to real dissonant meanings and interpretations” (Butler, The Reader 345). These problems are, however, productive for Butler, as she envisions gender and, indeed, woman, as the site of cultural meaning—the “site of contest” (Butler, The Reader 346). The multiple characters involved in the task of performing Latina-ness in different ways highlight the narrow stereotypes that are re-enforced through the media and through the characters themselves in search of economic success and social prestige. Just like the varied performances of gender Butler discusses in her work (i.e., drag) point to the artificiality of set definitions of gender and interrogate “whether a common understanding” of gender is even possible, so too do the characters’ performances of Latina identity point to the varied social construction of this ethnic identity and the consideration that no one possible meaning or definition is possible (Butler, The Reader 345). Like the cultural norms that shape gender expression, the Latina identities these characters exhibit prove that the norms function to both “condition” and “limit” [their] agency (Butler, The Reader 345). In other words, the women must perform certain expressions of Latina-ness so that they are recognized by dominant society; yet, in doing this, they inevitably limit the definition of Latina. Lauren is stuck in this exact conundrum. While she must play the part of the stereotypical Latina, this very performance is part and parcel of what instantiates the very stereotypes she aims to break down.

Lauren’s white boss, Chuck, described as nothing short of an idiot with “his argyle socks [that] don’t match because he is colorblind [. . .] His penny loafers [that] have pennies in them. [. . .] laughing in a way that is nervous and nerdy, because this is how he always laughs, like he is

six years old and has just slipped something slimy into his friend's milk carton," has achieved his success in publishing merely by coming from a very long familial line of publishers (Valdes-Rodriguez 104). Valdes-Rodriguez contrasts Chuck's acquisition of wealth and fame with these Latina women who have achieved success by working for it. Lauren's drive for success and hard work is juxtaposed to someone like her boss, who has never worked for what he has.

Furthermore, Chuck remains completely ignorant on the complexities of Latino/a culture, yet he is the one appointed to assign newspaper stories. When Lauren attempts to explain the necessity of writing a piece about the cultural tensions and differences between Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, he responds ignorantly with: "I don't think to the average reader there's any difference between Dominicos or Porta Ricans" (Valdes-Rodriguez 110). As he reminds Lauren that her column should be "fun, light, accessible" with "flesh and blood people that real people can relate to," he encourages her to once again do a story on Mexican migrant workers (Valdes-Rodriguez 104). He says, "I want you to get in there, Fernandez, live the life with them. Find out what moves them, what makes them tick. Find out what songs they sing around the campfire at night" (Valdes-Rodriguez 104). His ignorance regarding the complexity of Latino/a culture borders on the comic, as the reader is well aware of Lauren's frustration with people who pigeonhole all Latino/as as Mexican American migrant workers. In emphasizing Chuck's unearned position of authority that grants him the right to define what qualifies as news and what deserves to be printed, Valdes-Rodriguez hopes to convince the reader that the methods of achieving success exemplified by the six heroines will be admired, illustrating as they do sincere commitment to heightening awareness and understanding of Latina culture.

## The Paradoxical Role of Media in Defining Latina Identity

In addition to the role performance plays in demarcating tensions surrounding ethnic identity, the novel also criticizes the role media plays in shaping Latina identity—showing it at times to be the major enforcer of cultural codes that limit gendered and cultural expression. Four of the six heroines are directly involved in media relations and all in some way, like Lauren described above, attempt to use their relationship with media to complicate or explore Latina identity. The media, however, proves such a strong force that it often serves to narrow and contain gendered and cultural expectations (often through violence), preserve heterosexism, and prize methods of achieving success tied to mainstream ideals. Both Amber and Rebecca begin the novel with the intention of using media to increase their own and the public's cultural knowledge of Latina identity and history. The media proves, however, to be one of the major “regulatory regimes” acting to control expressions of ethnic identity (Butler, *The Reader* 3). Valdes-Rodriguez pays particular attention to the social exclusion and acts of violence the media incites—strategies that aim to define livability for “others.”

Rebecca is the successful owner and founder of *Ella*, a popular Hispanic women's magazine devoted to “elevat[ing] the image of Hispanic women, to inspire and empower them to be the best they can” (Valdes-Rodriguez 49). In essence, Rebecca's economic wealth has come about by appealing to this lucrative middle-upper class Hispanic women's market Lauren describes as “big business” (Valdes-Rodriguez 104). Lauren describes her several times as a woman who loves money and who has so much of it that she often gives it away to charitable causes, hires personal shoppers, and employs hired help around the house. Rebecca's insistence that she is “Spanish,” not “Mexican”—that she is descended from a long line of royalty and

would never date a black man--complicates understandings of whiteness by drawing attention to the racism inherent within Latino/a culture itself. The desire to distance herself from indigenous Indian roots and align her identity with Spanish ancestors serves to dissociate herself from the oppressed racialized women that currently make up the surplus labor force in various U.S. service industries or U.S./Mexico border factories. Whereas evoking indigenous figures in Chicana texts often serves to “giv[e] voice to . . . women on the bottom of a historically hierarchical economic and political structure,” Valdes-Rodriguez’ portrayal of characters like Rebecca who deny indigenous roots and instead embrace mythical Spanish ancestors suggests again that characters distance themselves from certain race and class backgrounds that impede economic wealth and social prowess (Alarcón 374). Rebecca’s character reveals a tension between two different measures of whiteness—one being Anglo American mainstream definitions of whiteness and the other being the skin color hierarchy present within her own home culture. Her goal, it seems, is to become as “white” as possible.

The novel’s treatment of Rebecca’s husband Brad provides a lens through which to view Rebecca’s changing character: from her first engagement with media as a potential tool to increase awareness about Latina culture to her present seasoned relationship with media’s capabilities and the economic wealth it has produced for her. Brad is described by Lauren as a tall white guy taking his time finishing his Ph.D who is set to inherit millions from his old-stock Albuquerque family with roots in real estate development. Rebecca admits that her initial attraction to him was his money--“that and his light hair and handsome face”-- as she wasn’t making her own at the time (Valdes-Rodriguez 57). But present time in the novel finds Rebecca and Brad’s marriage on the brink of collapse as the two continue their five-month habit of sleeping in separate rooms. Rebecca describes Brad as a critic of pop culture, and hence of the

magazine she has founded and continues to profit from. One night Rebecca enjoys Brad's absence as she flips through some magazines in peace. She rejoices out loud: "Now I can read through magazines in my own bed at night without him complaining about how crass pop culture is" (Valdes-Rodriguez 44). Lauren is highly critical of Brad and describes him as nothing short of a cultural tourist who attempts to use outdated white theories of Western philosophers to understand the world around him (and does so incorrectly, according to her); he "listen[s] with that gaping rich-boy maw to our conversation as if he were Jane Goodall and we were the goddamned gorillas" (Valdes-Rodriguez 21). To try to prevent him from marrying an "Hispanic," his parents threatened they would cut his yearly amount if he married Rebecca. When Brad later calls Rebecca out for "exploiting" Consuelo, the housekeeper, and taking on the role of "some status-quo white girl"—his "worst nightmare"—Brad questions Rebecca's aims and her manipulation of media to achieve economic success (Valdes-Rodriguez 57). While there is some speculation on Lauren's part over whether Brad married her just to anger his parents, or whether he sees her as a neat ethnic "specimen," his harsh treatment by the author, who presents him as an academic elitist who dabbles in cultural tourism and ridicules his every move, suggests a tension regarding how the "other" should navigate what Norma Alarcón calls the "crisis of the Anglo-American experience, where ('melting pot') whiteness, not *mestizaje*, has been constructed as the Absolute Idea of Goodness and Value" (377). Here the white male questions Latina Rebecca's use of *Ella* to achieve professional and economic success as well as her employment of Latina housekeepers. Valdes-Rodriguez indicts Brad on charges of essentializing some "earthy" Latina type with "neato" cultural traditions, like the ones the two participated in with her family at their wedding that Brad claims to have loved (Valdes-Rodriguez 57 and 33). For Brad, it is Rebecca's relationship with the media that changes her from someone in tune with

her cultural roots to someone who values money, prestige, and success. Her magazine has been both a lucrative business venture for her as well as the catalyst for subscribing to mainstream white norms.

As Rebecca and Brad separate, she begins to date Andre, a black man of Nigerian descent who is a software millionaire. Readers are led to believe that Rebecca's character is maturing, that her choice of Andre is a step in the right direction since he clearly supports her success and since, before, she would have never dated a black man. Andre, however, is an interesting juxtaposition to Brad. He believes young American blacks who "ski[p] school," don't "stud[y] hard," or "dress improperly," and then "blame the 'system' for their problems" need to be told "the bloody truth"—that if one works hard enough just like he has, one can be successful (Valdes-Rodriguez 251). Brad is accused of being a cultural tourist, but Rebecca's reading up on Nigeria and her overly-eager slew of cultural questions aimed at Andre is dissatisfying at best for the reader—who sees a woman who has swapped one wealthy man who questioned her decisions for another who corroborates the author's view that one is entitled to whatever success and wealth he or she can garner. Whereas Brad's cultural tourism is deemed unacceptable and ridiculed to the point of exhaustion, Rebecca's cultural tourism is presented in a positive light because it allows Rebecca to continue in her money-making enterprise without having to justify anything that she does. When this quest is disassociated from whiteness and re-packaged as ethnic agency, it becomes commendable. Rather than simply inheriting wealth because of the color of one's skin like Chuck and Brad, the women in this book are prized for achieving the same monetary success via creative methods of manipulating the potential of media and capitalizing on this growing middle-class Latina demographic.

The text risks securing representations of whiteness and asserting the dominance of white

mainstream culture through characters like Andre and Rebecca. Rebecca Aanerud paraphrases Richard Dyer when she notes that, “in a white supremacist nation, whiteness secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular” (37). Aanerud argues that the greatest risk a text takes is in presenting whiteness as “unraced” or “racially neutral” (37). Whiteness, far from being merely a monolithic descriptor of a race, is more a socio-cultural code “informed by historical moment, region, political climate, and racial identity” (Aanerud 3). Valdes-Rodriguez condones Rebecca’s method of profiting from her magazine by positioning it as an act of agency for the Latina woman when in fact the underlying assertion that the magazine does some collective good for Latinas more broadly speaking is questionable. Both Rebecca and Lauren work toward expanding the definition of Latina, yet it is the cultural, racial, and class tensions their actions create that cause the reader to reconsider how she understands the realities of social location.

In “Chicana Feminism: In the Tracks of the ‘Native’ Woman,” Norma Alarcón talks about how the “crisis of the Anglo-American experience,” or the “diffusion of mass media archetypes and stereotypes of all women, which continuously interpellate them into the patriarchal order according to their class, race (ethnicity), and gender,” creates in Chicanas a complex need to unify, or “make sense of it all” (380 and 376). Alarcón argues that one of the ways in which Chicanas engage this “ongoing process” to unify Chicanas’ consciousness aimed not so much at “recover[ing] a lost ‘utopia’ nor the ‘true’ essence of our being,” but rather at understanding Chicanas’ “contemporary presence and non-presence in the sociopolitical and cultural milieu,” is by identifying a “collective female experience” (375-6). Alarcón notes that a popular way Chicana writers “achieve unification,” or move the Chicana position from “previously ‘empty’ of meanings” to one with meaning, is by acts of “cultural recollection, and

re-membrance” such as “recodify[ing] the native woman” in their stories (376). By evoking the “maligned and abused indigenous woman,” the Chicana starts from the bottom of it all and works her way up, hoping to make sense of the present situation facing Latinas/Chicanas (Alarcón 375). This quest usually entails, according to Alarcón, defining liberation in terms of social movements and group solidarity. The novel parodies this search for a unified Latina cultural or traditional identity as a worthy venture with its treatment of the character of Amber, who embarks on a quest to find and unify a collective Latina consciousness by taking on the native identity of Cuicatl. The idea behind remembering the indigenous woman in Chicana texts is that she may represent a collective female consciousness that forces recognition of the racial and cultural backgrounds that have been forgotten due to “imperialist racist and sexist practices” (Alarcón 375). Embracing the native woman serves as a way to confront these “practices” for how they have established skin color hierarchies in Latino/a culture and to contemplate the denial of cultural roots that have come about as a result of these “practices.” The novel’s treatment of Amber suggests that Latina identity is not to be defined by the past, but rather by the present and current opportunities available.

Where Amber ends up at the close of the novel is far different from where she is at the beginning. Amber’s commitment to (and profit from) mainstream music labels at the end of the book contrasts sharply with her anti-commercial and anti-conformity views at the beginning of the book. Such a dramatic change in character suggests how extreme, and ridiculous as we’ll see, Amber’s view is at the outset of the book. Lauren’s portrayal of Amber early on is textured with ridicule. She notes that when Amber came to college, she knew very little Spanish and hardly anything about her cultural roots as a result of growing up in a small white town near San Diego under the influence of her Republican parents. Lauren describes her as a *pocha*, who, “for the



uninitiated, refers to the kind of Mexican-American who speaks no Spanish and breaks into a sweat if she eats anything hotter than Old El Paso mild salsa” (Valdes-Rodriguez 27). Lauren continues, “She was only vaguely aware of being a Hispanic when she got to Boston U., and didn’t think much about it until she met Saul” (Valdes-Rodriguez 28). Saul--fluent in Spanish, in touch with his Latino roots, and knowledgeable about Mexican immigrant struggles in America--initially inspires Amber to search out and re-claim her ethnic heritage. Amber’s self-initiated quest to find her ethnic identity leads her to start a rock band and meet Gato: “an Indian prince, dark, powerful, and proud” (Valdes-Rodriguez 91). Amber engages in her own acts of cultural tourism as she turns herself over to the teachings of Gato, who informs her about the lives of the early Mexicans before the Europeans came. Amber ultimately ends up rejecting both Spanish and English as equally foreign tongues, adopting instead the “Mexica name” Cuicatl which no one can pronounce (Valdes-Rodriguez 128).

Vowing not to be popularized within the mainstream radio music hub, Amber sings in Spanish and Nahuatl, records her own albums and sells them herself, and incites audiences at her performances with political rants that advocate social movement and change. Amber’s quest to find and embrace her heritage and profess anti-conformity with major pop culture music labels and mainstream white culture is treated with humor and derision by Lauren and parody by the author. Both believe that such a far-fetched quest that arises not out of necessity or real cultural roots and interest, but rather, a consciousness one has developed about one’s ethnic identity partly to impress a man and partly to do something new and cool, is comical at best. The *sucias*, indeed, point out that this “true essence of being” that surfaces from “long[ing] for the ‘lost origins’” is itself a performance that brings about “the end of Amber as we knew her” (Alarcón 375 and Valdes-Rodriguez 28). When our informative narrator introduces us to Amber at the

beginning of novel, it is with these telling words: “Now, Amber. Ugh. I don’t know where to *begin* with *this* girl” (Valdes-Rodriguez 27). Mid-way through the book, Amber reluctantly accepts a record deal with Wagner Records New Latin division and then rides on the waves of its success. Told that her music has “crossover potential,” Amber is intrigued by how much additional money she could make if she recorded an English single (Valdes-Rodriguez 136). The producer’s answer--“It depends on you . . . But it could be as much as a few million more”-- leads Amber to declare: “I am not wedded to Spanish anymore. One European language versus another, I could care less” (Valdes-Rodriguez 136). The way Amber moves easily between performing the native, culturally oppressed woman committed to the revolutionary potentials of social movement to a woman whose values and allegiances are easily compromised by money illustrates the falsity of her quest to discover some kind of unified Latina identity.

When Amber begins to “sell out,” she is accused by her fans of “going commercial;” the *sucias*, however, applaud her success (Valdes-Rodriguez 215). That the *sucias* condone Amber’s lifestyle and profession at the end of the novel suggests that searching for a collective Latina consciousness via cultural history has its own limits in that it can act as one of the social norms that traps, defines, and contains Latina identity. In this novel, the “enormous mandate to make ‘sense’ of it all” is removed from social location and social history and re-positioned in contemporary consumer-driven society where the Latina heroines have access to more crafty ways of fashioning agency (Alarcón 380). Not only is Amber wealthier and more famous by the end of the book, but her high status is what allows for other characters in the book like Amaury, who comes from the working class, to succeed. Amber’s success in mainstreaming her music is what allows for Amaury to move his family out of their present situation and into a better one. To get Lauren’s new love interest Amaury off the streets and away from selling drugs to support

his family, Lauren asks Amber to give him a position at Wagner Records and he ends up making good money there as an event planner for the Latin marketing division. At the final *sucia* meeting in the book, Amber arrives in a white stretch limo arranged for her by the record label, and Lauren notes that because of Amber's popularity and fame, it's impossible not to know her by Cuicatl, as "every teenager on the street [is] shouting it and wearing it on T-shirts" (Valdes-Rodriguez 307). Now that the name means nothing socially or historically, but rather has become a commodified accessory, everyone can pronounce it. Lauren describes Amber at the end of the book as being authentically happy, so much so that she wishes she could be like her. Amber is, according to Lauren, finally producing good music that "blows [her] mind . . . [it's] deep, and it's beautiful" (Valdes-Rodriguez 307). While Lauren admits that maybe Amber's earlier political talk "ha[d] a point," and that what she used to refer to as "garbage" maybe isn't "garbage," but rather "history," it is largely Amber's concession to Lauren's view about "how different all us Latinas can actually be"--as well as her commercial and material success--that leads to her acceptance of Amber (Valdes-Rodriguez 307).

Amber chalks up her dramatic character change to needing to reach more people with her music. Additionally, she accedes to the powers of media to make what they will of her public musician persona despite what she herself may desire. To some extent Amber relinquishes control of the kind of musician she wanted to be; that musician and her music are now in the hands of the media to manipulate how they will. Amber laments the fact that she is constantly categorized as some variation of a white or black singer—"angry 'Latina Alanis,' or a 'Latina Joplin,' or a 'Latina Courtney Love'" (Valdes-Rodriguez 218). These definitions of white success are what prompt her to sing in the other languages and to create an alternate, different, identity for herself. She goes on to blame the media for perpetuating false information and faulty

comparisons, for generating her history for her. She comments: “So this is how history gets made. Reporters do self-therapy with people like me as their backdrop and the world as their witness, and the words, however false, stick permanently, available to harvest by countless generations of historian to come” (Valdes-Rodriguez 218). In doing this, Valdes-Rodriguez suggests that Amber’s quest to identify common roots for Latinas in history was built on faulty assumptions from the start. As Amber accomplishes success as a singer, she washes her hands clean of the responsibility to stand by her allegiances and continue to question and open up discussion about the complexity of Latina identity. The narrative is rather superficially resolved here as Amber achieves success by adopting mainstream values and distancing herself from any kind of search for tradition or culture. This goes along with the author’s intentions to separate Latina identity from marginalized roots and working class backgrounds; instead, Amber can use the media to move up and out into professional urban life. Amber's character is troubling to the reader because, as the most political heroine, Valdes-Rodriguez’ treatment of her suggests that there are two polar opposite extremes—either over-the-top superficial political or apolitical. There really is no middle ground here. Amber is mocked and made fun of, her quest to reclaim ethnic heritage considered ridiculous, because, it seems, her actual roots in money and Republicanism prohibit her from achieving any kind of authentic or meaningful political consciousness. So she might as well mesh with the mainstream.

The desire to separate Latina identity from working-class backgrounds, brown skin, and historical social locations makes evident the tensions over class conflict within Latina/o culture. The popular *sucia* mantra echoed by Amber’s declaration that “it’s about time a Mexica got to ride in style” measures one’s success by the wealth and fame one achieves rather than one’s engagement in structural issues of oppression or discrimination (Valdes-Rodriguez 307). While

this simplistic ending works for the middle-class Latina or white non-Latina reader looking for affirmation and encouragement, the tensions the book points to in terms of the cultural norms that define Latina identity and how carefully these are enforced to reinstate and normalize white ideals of success is troubling indeed. Non-conformance with contemporary consumer-driven mainstream models of success is strictly policed. The media plays a significant role in both perpetuating false or narrow representations of Latina identity while remaining the primary avenue of success for these women. This perplexity governs the book and makes it possible to discuss the various cultural tensions that arise.

#### Subverting Heteronormativity in *Dirty Girls*

While the stories of Lauren, Rebecca, and Amber illustrate underlying tensions of race and class conflict in Latina cultures, this chapter turns now to an analysis of another way the book attempts to subvert dominant ideologies—this time of sexuality. Elizabeth's story is not an uncommon one within Chicana feminist writings that explore lesbian identity as a method of breaking down strict patriarchal limits imposed on women's expressions of sexuality. Just as Carla Trujillo, in "La Virgen de Guadalupe and Her Reconstruction in Chicana Lesbian Desire," argues for creating "several possible cultural and religious reconstructions of" such a highly respected figure as La Virgen because "those who possess her also receive that [divine] sanction," Elizabeth's character is an attempt to establish lesbian desire in the Chicana paradigm of sexuality (218). As Aída Hurtado explains in "The Politics of Sexuality in the Gender Subordination of Chicanas," the gender dynamics present in Chicano communities assign women into one of two different sexual roles: whore or virgin (386). Hurtado explains: "the assignment

into the categories of ‘virgins’ and ‘whores’ is based largely on physical characteristics and a woman’s assertiveness and strength” (387). While these are the two predominant roles for women to occupy, Hurtado notes a third: “In the interstices of the bipolar conception of Chicanas’ sexuality is the neuter woman—one who does not fit either sexual pole” (386-7). This “femme-macho” is attractive to men because of her strength and the fact that she is sexually active yet emotionally uninvolved. The femme-macho’s sexuality, perhaps because it is so ambiguous and mysterious, “is so accentuated and objectified that she is in effect neutered” (387). As Hurtado contends, many Chicanas embrace this marginalized sexuality in an effort to escape the confines of the virgin/whore dichotomy and achieve “liberation” (388). Elizabeth’s story here functions to open up discussion of lesbian identity within Chicana culture; the ways in which heteronormativity is enforced with certain limits of acceptable gender expression provokes discussion about tensions present within the Latina community regarding sexuality.

Elizabeth, who begins the novel as a successful co-host on a network morning show with dreams of being a national news anchor, ultimately fails to navigate the powerful throes of the media and its enforcement of gendered norms. Elizabeth grew up poor in Columbia with little access to opportunities; she remembers her mother warning her about the restrictive gender roles that would be available to her: “Women are mothers in Columbia, and cooks. They are virgins or whores and there is nothing else, nothing in between, nothing” (Valdes-Rodriguez 66). Elizabeth then informs the reader in the confessional and emotional tone that pervades her chapters: “That’s why my mother never wanted me to go back . . . she always told me she wanted me to live free, in a nation where my sex and skin would not cause outpourings of hatred” (Valdes-Rodriguez 66). For Elizabeth, America represents the land of freedom of expression, a place where she could be anything and anyone. The confessional tone of Elizabeth’s first entry is

markedly different from the other women's when she uncovers a deep desire to tell Lauren "how [she] feel[s] about her" (Valdes-Rodriguez 61). She reiterates time and again that she has a secret that she cannot tell anyone, stating "The risk would be too huge" (Valdes-Rodriguez 61).

Hurtado asserts that *femme-machos*, because they do not subscribe to the strict gender codes of the two predominant models, are allowed a greater range of emotions. The one emotion they are not allowed to express, however, is weakness, as they are "always in mortal combat with men to emasculate them and overpower them" (388). The narrative tension rises here as Elizabeth, who appears to have it all on the outside, reveals to the reader her weakness—namely that all she really wants to do is write poetry and love whoever she wants to love.

Elizabeth candidly explains to the reader that, because she is a popular public persona and conforms to notions of mainstream feminine beauty and behavior on the outside, people think they know her. She says, "People know who I am here. They know me. They think they know me . . . They send me Christmas cards and thousands of letters with all sorts of unsolicited advice. . . They all think they know me. None of them do. No one does" (Valdes-Rodriguez 64-5). She fears that declaring herself a lesbian would alienate her from her mother, her *sucias*, her job, and her potential future job—"and [she] want[s] that job. So much" (Valdes-Rodriguez 66). Elizabeth is in a difficult position at the start of the book. While she recognizes the fakeness of her career, T.V. personality, and related success, she is torn between the career and success society tells her she should strive for and the life and identity she really should uncover.

Elizabeth, who is time and again referred to as the most beautiful of the *sucias*, made a living as a runway model in college and is described by Lauren as "by far the most fine. Her limbs are long and lean . . . and her face peacefully symmetrical" (Valdes-Rodriguez 31). She is so beautiful that she is noted as the only woman who could possibly steal Sara's prized Roberto

away. At the beginning of the book, all of the *sucias* are enamored of Roberto and find him the most perfect man because he acts lovingly toward Sara and gives her frequent and expensive gifts. What baffles Lauren and the other *sucias* the most about Elizabeth is why this beautiful, curvy, sexy woman would drive a truck: “I find it hilarious, so tall and beautiful . . . and she drives a freakin’ pickup? By *choice*?” (Valdes-Rodriguez 30). They are equally troubled with why she hasn’t had a decent relationship with a man yet: “She’s been single forever. Never had a serious relationship that I’ve heard of” (Valdes-Rodriguez 30). In “Melancholy Gender/ Refused Identification,” Judith Butler discusses how masculine and feminine are not so much “dispositions,” but rather, “accomplishments” (Butler, *The Reader* 247). One “achieves” masculine or feminine characteristics by properly performing the expressions of gender available to them. When Elizabeth doesn’t “accomplish” characteristics tied to the two most commonly accepted expressions of gender within Latina/o community, the women are baffled. This tension results because they have difficulty placing her gender within the limits currently accepted.

Hurtado argues that only femme-machos, “who are not really women but a hybrid of *man/woman*, can, to a *certain extent*, have a will” because the proper woman who is conceptualized as “not fully human but rather as property that can be damaged by sexual violation” lacks the ability to choose (394). Hurtado distinguishes this will, or ability to make a choice, from a “human” and, therefore, “male,” will, instead calling it “an animalistic will that needs to be tamed” (394). Unlike wives and virgins, who are supposed to feel no sexual desire, but rather “see it as a necessary evil to accomplish the higher goal of becoming a mother,” Elizabeth’s conundrum is that, since she has the capability to assert sexual desire because her sexual identity lies outside that of the traditional virgin or wife, she must express her desire for another woman without being tamed by those who maintain the strict gendered codes of conduct



(Hurtado 394). When Elizabeth comes out, it is Sara's husband Roberto--holding Sara to strict Cuban expectations of a proper woman--who violently polices Elizabeth's sexuality. Referred to by Sara as "the speech," Roberto often tells her: "You're a Cuban woman, a decent woman. You aren't an American whore. It's fine that you enjoy yourself, but why do you have to act like that? You're the mother of my sons. Where's your pride?" after the two have engaged in sex (Valdes-Rodriguez 71). Enjoying sex is not permitted to Sara because she is a wife and is supposed to see sex as "a necessary evil to accomplish the higher goal of becoming a mother" (Hurtado 394). Additionally, "any wife or girlfriend who seems to 'enjoy sex' too much is suspect of potentially betraying her possessor" in traditional Chicano culture (Hurtado 395). Elizabeth's coming out unnerves especially Roberto, who is the lead enforcer of gendered norms in the book. Especially threatening to him is the possibility that she may be in the position of choosing her sexual object--another woman--which by and large divorces her from true femininity since women are not supposed to assert sexuality; they are, rather, to remain the possessions.

Butler asserts that "the fear of homosexual desire in a woman may induce a panic that she is losing her femininity, that she is not a woman, that she is no longer a proper woman, that if she is not quite a man, she is like one, and hence monstrous in some way" (Butler, The Reader 247). Deemed by Roberto to be the most beautiful and feminine, Elizabeth's coming out challenges his own masculinity and heterosexuality. If his wife is seen with Elizabeth and the media assumes the two have a relationship, this jeopardizes Roberto's heterosexuality because, as Butler suggests, to "become a man," one must effectively repudiate femininity in order to establish heterosexuality. If Sara is attracted to Elizabeth's femininity, then Roberto's masculinity is in question. She asserts: "the desire for the feminine is marked by that repudiation: he wants the woman he would never be. He wouldn't be caught dead being her: therefore he wants her"

(Butler, The Reader 248). So Elizabeth's repudiation of him implies that he was not enough of a man, or "hetero" enough. One of his "most anxious aims" is to differentiate and "elaborate" his masculinity from her femininity such that he will go to any extent to "discover and install proof of that difference" (Valdes-Rodriguez 248). Declared by Roberto to be "a total, complete waste of a beautiful woman," he threatens his wife with more physical abuse if she continues her friendship with Elizabeth. His words and actions are best described as overly anxious and irrational and culminate in his attack on Sara and Vilma—easily the most senselessly violent act in the book.

While it can be argued that Elizabeth truly comes into herself—she, in effect, "becomes"—as a result of coming out and recognizing what Butler terms her "otherness," what is interesting here are the ways in which other characters and the media seek to reinforce heteronormativity. Elizabeth's quest of liberation through the femme-macho identity is not without its share of violence. This policing of heterosexuality reveals a deep-seated tension over what is at stake for coming out and how heteronormativity is maintained and restored. The most violent act of gender policing occurs when Roberto learns of Sara's meeting with Elizabeth and nearly kills her as a result. Before he pushes the pregnant Sara down the stairs, resulting in the death of the fetus, he tells her: "I can't stand the thought of you and her as a couple. It makes me crazy. It's the worst insult a man can think of" (Valdes-Rodriguez 198). After his irrational act of beating Sara senseless, he does the same to their nanny Vilma and kills her as a result. Roberto's violent acts come about as a result of his diminishing belief in his heterosexuality—after all, how could he have been attracted to a woman who turned out to be gay? Butler asserts that one of the main ways in which heterosexuality naturalizes itself is by "insisting on the radical otherness of homosexuality" (Butler, The Reader 250). Roberto assures his masculinity by abolishing

anything that puts it into question. Even though Sara and Elizabeth are just friends, the two of them together has the potential to incite queries from the public regarding their relationship, and it is this public uncertainty regarding his wife's sexuality that Roberto cannot stand. Thus, by repudiating homosexuality, Roberto attempts to reinstate not only his masculinity, but also heteronormativity.

In contrast to more mainstream white Chick Lit texts, *Dirty Girls* emphasizes the violence inflicted on one's body as a result of not conforming to the restrictive gender roles maintained by dominant ideologies. Stepping outside these limits of gender expression has far greater consequences and harsher punishments on the female body. Roberto tries at all costs to preserve the gender status quo. Third World Feminism, and Chicana feminism in particular, has emphasized that feminist praxis should focus on areas of shared oppression such as social location. Cherrie Moraga's "Theory of the Flesh" elucidates how "flesh and blood experiences" such as "the physical realities of our lives . . . our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings" are the primary ways by which women of color experience the world around them (Anzaldúa and Moraga 23). Furthermore, links have been made between forms of gender domination and what Antonia I. Castañeda calls "pervasive racism with its attendant, vicious violence against people of color" (312). Castañeda argues that contemporary forms of power "derive from, feed upon, and sustain one another" by furthering methods of domination established early on during "the invasion of the Americas" (312). *Dirty Girls* seems to corroborate the assertion that gender domination and racial oppression are inter-related through the violent acts performed on the female body, and this text, like many other Chicana feminist writings, involves itself in constructing a feminist politics that confronts the varied histories and oppression felt by Latinas. In this case, it is Sara's and Vilma's bodies who are the direct targets

of hate and violence. While Elizabeth escapes immediate violent acts on her body, the media plays a significant role in functioning to police her homosexual desire.

Almost overnight, Elizabeth goes from occupying the hearts of the public as one of the most-loved morning show hosts to a villainized target for hate. As she listens to threatening voicemail messages of intimidating people vowing to hurt or kill her, she wonders how this is all possible. Newspapers print and spread the story, provoking her once-fans to trek down to the radio station from as far away as Montana to wave signs of “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve” and fling verbal insults at her; one man calls her a “disgusting . . . crazy dyke” (Valdes-Rodriguez 173-4). Soon her own mother won’t speak to her anymore. When she overhears a national talk radio show pose the following question: “What is it about these Spics, Jack? Are all the good-looking ones gay? First Ricky Martin, then Liz,” she declares: “I am not welcome in my own life now” (Valdes-Rodriguez 175). Tension results over how Elizabeth’s lesbian identity challenges viewers’ sexual identities and understandings of Latina culture. Her boss matter-of-factly informs her that the reason she was so popular and successful was because “they all wanted you, all the men in town. All the women wanted to be like you . . . If you’re gay, or lesbian, whatever, they can’t fantasize the way they used to” (Valdez-Rodriguez 179). Her mainstream success was dependent upon a heterosexual identity. As Elizabeth grows disillusioned with the meaning of a career she has worked so hard for, her boss confirms her greatest fear--that hiring “a beautiful black woman who talks like a white woman but is actually Hispanic [. . .] got all the [diversity] advocates off [his] ass” (Valdes-Rodriguez 179).

After learning that she was hired to fill a quota and that her success and popularity were bound up solely in her heterosexual, feminine appeal, Elizabeth loses faith in the system and vows to quit and pursue her dreams. Elizabeth’s homosexuality threatens not only Roberto’s

masculinity and heterosexuality, but it also causes an uproar among her fans who believed they knew her, spurring questions of the media's role in naturalizing heteronormativity. The anger felt in the voices and acts of her once-fans betrays a real sense of disappointment and hurt—as if they've been cheated. What is more, news of her lesbianness spreads like wildfire through the channels of the media. It is the media's taping of Elizabeth's visit with Sara that ultimately causes both Vilma's death and that of Sara's fetus. In this novel, the media provides an outlet through which the public voice the general consensus of uneasiness with homosexual desire and, being such a strong voice, it leads to Elizabeth's demise in the sense that she will not be able to live the dream her mother had for her. Now that she has decided to live according to her will, instead of according to mainstream expectations, her place will continue to be no place. While the novel attempts to paint a happy picture of Elizabeth at the end of the story, her life has now become inherently more complex.

After deciding to run away with her lover back to Columbia--the place she lovingly calls her "home"--to pursue writing poetry, Elizabeth soon finds out that "sexual women are bad in Columbia" as well and is driven out shortly after arriving (Valdes-Rodriguez 66). The end of the book attempts to present her as happy and forward-looking, but tension continues to simmer as we see Elizabeth in more of an unpredictable and transitional state than one promising happiness and success. By the end of the book, she has decided to attempt to produce a show and move to Miami, where she hopes to "finish writing a book of poems" (Valdes-Rodriguez 307). Of all the *sucias*, her description at the end of the book is by far the shortest—five lines to be exact. Lauren describes the success of the other women in much greater detail, allotting at least a few paragraphs to the status and future of Sara, Rebecca, Amber, and Usnavys. This causes an ominous feeling to be cast over the novel as a whole, a sense that the forces that police

heteronormativity have won somewhat. Elizabeth is driven out of her home country, a place she had hoped to return to write and feel “at home” (Valdes-Rodriguez 295). She is also driven out of Boston, where she has become “the subject of a morality war between the extreme far Christian right and the extreme far gay left” (Valdes-Rodriguez 292). She is in search of a place that will accept her. Valdes-Rodriguez critiques the influence and power the media has to regulate and rein in heterosexuality. The immense amount of tension surrounding Elizabeth’s story and the people who she affects, as well as this unresolved ending, indicates evidence of what Butler terms a lingering homosexual desire. According to Butler, repressing homosexual desire actually “preserves,” rather than “abolishes,” homosexuality (Butler, The Reader 252). We get the sense at the end of the novel that Elizabeth, even though she has made her relationship with Selwyn public, will continue to struggle negotiating her Latina identity and gay desires.

It is this sense of uncertainty, this fear that she will encounter other acts of violence, which prevents the superficial happy ending for Elizabeth’s character. Although the narrator wants us to believe she has choices, and that going to Miami with her lover will be the choice that makes her happy, the violence inflicted on her as a lesbian has been very real throughout the book. But, as Butler contends, “to live” is only “to live a life politically [. . .] to recognize one’s relation to others, one’s relation to power, and one’s responsibility to strive for a collective, more inclusive future” (Butler, The Reader 12). While I’m not too sure we see the striving for the collective, we do see a life that now cannot live *without* being political and aware of societal forces that aim to regulate and maintain. In this sense, then, Elizabeth has won. And Valdes-Rodriguez’ readers have won, too, as they bear witness (in a novel within the Chick Lit genre) to the ramifications of gender and racial subordination and resistance. The real success of this novel lies in its ability to raise questions about the tensions that exist within Latina/o culture in regard

to race, class, and gender in a way that makes such a discussion available to a broad audience. The various ways the heroines choose to engage in performances of “Latina-ness” or whiteness to distance themselves from some definitions of Latina/o and move themselves toward other definitions illustrates just how complex the issues are. The heroines engage in various “tactics for intervening in and transforming social relations” and the ways in which they define the problems and imagine resistance raises many questions about the complexities of contemporary gender and race relations within Latina/o culture and within more mainstream American culture (Sandoval, "Mestizaje as Method" 360).

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

My examination of Chick Lit in this dissertation has rested on the broader contention that pop culture texts hold the potential for subversion. Chick Lit is a fascinating genre that is created, maintained, and defined by mass media. As illustrated by the various characters throughout *The Dirty Girls Social Club*, mass media holds the paradoxical potential to both further societal norms and mainstream expectations of gender and race *and* subvert these norms. Since, more often than not, authors, heroines, and the books themselves are caught up in the throes of media, the genre can be said to be both furthering and normalizing dominant ideologies of whiteness and femininity while, at the same time, revealing the tensions and anxiety that women feel about upholding these norms. Similar to how Lauren's character chooses to play along with the media's expectations and stereotypes of Latinas in order to achieve professional success *and* indict the racism of those around her, so too do the authors acquiesce to marketing their books as light, insignificant, beach reads so that they will sell. Part of my task, then, has been to attempt to distinguish the ways in which authors tap into preconceived notions of the "post-feminist" urban woman of privilege who enjoys shopping, sex, and drama, *and* the briefer, more telling, instances of rebellion within the texts that suggest the dangerous and unrealistic assumptions adherence to such a feminist philosophy mandates.

My cultural analysis of Chick Lit steps outside of the dominant view academia has of the genre--as unworthy of literary investigation because it seems to focus solely on the individual desires of women who define themselves by the shoes they're wearing and the handbag they're carrying. For me, texts matter little except in what they say and do culturally. My interest in



Chick Lit is born out of an inquisitiveness that reaches beyond the market covers of these texts and asks the question, in the words of Jane Tompkins: what “cultural work” are these books doing? For the popular reader? For the cultural critic? While widely dismissed as a kind of "postfeminist fantasy" that rests on the idea that "feminism did its work in eliminating barriers to equality, massively expanded women's 'choices' and gave women the tools they need to solve any problems that comes their way," Chick Lit, rather than celebrating the choices and freedom women supposedly have, actually points to the dangers associated with adopting such a worldview (Dow 127). While the women masquerade as having choices and achieving "empowerment," the ways they go about accomplishing this reveal to the reader just how unrealistic, convoluted, and bound for failure such quests really are. While popular media would have us believe that anything is possible for women--a phenomenon Ruth Rosen argues created the image of the "Superwoman" in contemporary women's minds--Chick Lit questions what's at stake for believing this. In fact, the "postfeminist" author that Cris Mazza had in mind when putting together the first collection of Chick Lit--whom she envisioned as someone who would assume the responsibility for her actions instead of blaming structural systems of oppression--has yet to be realized within the genre. Rather, what you have are women performing the role of the "empowered" woman who reveal through their (mis)adventures in their professional and personal lives that such a "postfeminist" view is, at best, impractical, and, at worst, the reason for women's continued marginalized status.

The primary way in which the genre resists dominant ideologies tied to gender and race is in how the novels reveal unresolved desires the women feel to step outside of clearly established norms regarding work, beauty, gender relations, motherhood, and race. Although the novels, in the end, fold back into dominant ideologies and fail to resolve desires that challenge the

heteronormative matrix controlled by cultural norms, it is in the act of revealing these unsettling, unresolved desires that the books call into question the very dominant ideologies the genre as a whole tends to rehearse. Butler's theories of performativity and her notions of "social livability" and "social death" have been invaluable to me as key theories by which to examine how heroines are attempting to resist and why they are failing. Butler insists that change must occur from within existing social structures--that gender expressions must be proliferated and recognized as viable and intelligible by society--and that, by examining ways in which hegemonic cultural forces limit and police certain understandings of gendered and racial identity, we can work toward expanding the definition of human to those on the sexual and racial margins. The resolutions, as in many pop culture narratives, close the books by offering superficial, accommodating, conventional endings that encourage readers to see themselves as independent women who can make choices to empower their lives. Such endings attempt to assuage reader's fears about the ability of dominant ideologies to guide one's life and provide personal and professional satisfaction. What the reader is ultimately left with, however, is a sense that such a "postfeminist fantasy" is clearly that--a fantasy.

It has been my intention throughout the dissertation to both illuminate ways in which the genre seems to challenge traditional notions of gender and the ways in which women (and men) are limited by the forces of cultural imperialism that act on the subject to maintain dominant ideologies. I have also aimed to draw attention to the shortcomings of the genre in how it is ultimately unable to resolve the tensions that result from desiring outside of what is deemed acceptable by mainstream society. The genre is, itself, policed by certain mainstream and popular expectations to uphold dominant ideologies related to race, gender, and class and we see this reality reflected in the novels. My purpose, however, has been to open up discussion of the genre

as fertile ground for examining tensions in contemporary gender relations, especially in regard to how the books appeal to readers with this strong underlying *desire to resist*. This unresolved, resistant desire lies beneath the novels and, in the moments where it surfaces, challenges readers to really examine what the book is about. How is a culture of whiteness built upon alienating racial others? What do women's inabilities to resist mainstream definitions of beauty suggest about pressures to conform? How are women challenging modern conceptions of masculinity and/or motherhood? How are professional Latinas negotiating their identities amid all of these pressures? It is my hope that this dissertation will provoke discussion about where the genre is headed and what cultural work it has the potential to do as it continues to morph into subgenres, infiltrate the global markets, and influence different demographics of women living under very different circumstances.

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