From House on Mango Street to Playing With Boys

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Furthermore, the young woman becomes enfranchised—finds her identity specifically as “American”—via a commodified vision of discourse of the middle-class citizen-consumer. Indeed in chica lit, ethnicity is proved to be fully covalent with middle-class success.

In their Latina/o Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature Raphael Dalleo and Elena Sáez discuss “the relationship of ‘authentic’ ethnicity such as speaking Spanish, eating ethnic food, or having what amount to stock characters as family members to the reification of the Latina/o subject and the processes of commodification” (112); they argue that marketing—especially that which is aimed at mobile Mexican-Americans, Nuyoricans, Cuban-Americans, and so on, but who are also negatively invested in largely clichéd notions of “authentic” ethnicity—can lead to a privileging of “the right” ethnic man and the attainment of material success in the workplace. These characters are clearly meant to mirror the audience at which these novels are aimed: not just young women who are middle-class or upwardly mobile Mexican-Americans, but of an unknown white man and her Mexican mother. She decides that her “white blood” is at fault for her not being Latin enough, and constructs a list of the ten things she must do to remedy the problem: among them, learning Spanish, learning how to cook, and most importantly finding a suitable “Mexican” boyfriend. After many adventures, Marcela resolves her crisis by finding the professional Mexican-American man of her dreams and finding her Mexican “roots” by embarking on a project to make an animated movie of the conquest of the Aztecs by Hernán Cortés, called Aztec Kings.

I trace the literary lineage of the popular genre called “chica lit,” a combination of the romance novel and the “shopping” novel à la Sex and the City, but with “ethnic” authors and (mostly) Mexican-American characters. These novels resituate themselves in relationship to older 1970s models of resistant ethnicity by demonstrating that their protagonists can become successful consumer-citizens with a touch of ethnic identity and the right ethnic man. I show how the Internet has enabled the authors to market themselves more easily, and I finish by discussing why these novels should be taught in Chicana/Latina and ethnic studies courses.

Palabras clave: chica lit, novela de romance, mexicano-americano, consuismo, ciudadanía, género

Texto completo:
“From House on Mango Street to Becoming Latina”

At the beginning of Lara Ríos’ (1) 2006 “chica lit” novel Becoming Latina in Ten Easy Steps, we learn that the Mexican-American protagonist Marcela Álvarez (27 years old, a successful movie animator) has never felt, as she puts it, “Latina” enough for her family: “I’ve never been to Mexico, yet I feel disloyal when I feel nothing at the sight of a waving Mexican flag.... My family makes me crazy” (3). (2) To make matters worse, in the next few pages, we learn along with Marcela that she is not the biological daughter of her Mexican father, but of an unknown white man and her Mexican mother. She decides that her “white blood” is at fault for her not being Latina enough, and constructs a list of the ten things she must do to remedy the problem: among them, learning Spanish, learning how to cook, and most importantly finding a suitable “Mexican” boyfriend. After many adventures, Marcela resolves her crisis by finding the professional Mexican-American man of her dreams and finding her Mexican “roots” by embarking on a project to make an animated movie of the conquest of the Aztecs by Hernán Cortés, called Aztec Kings.

Novels like Becoming Latina, written by U.S. Latina and Mexican-American authors and featuring a young, upwardly mobile U.S. Latina or Mexican-American protagonist (or a group of Latina/Mexican-American girlfriends) are part of a fast-growing subgenre of “chica lit,” itself a niche market of “chick lit.” In these novels, the Latina or Mexican-American character is faced with some kind of an ethnic identity crisis, often connected both to her family and her initial romantic relationship, and ultimately (though not always) resolved via the discovery of the “right” ethnic man and the attainment of material success in the workplace. These characters are clearly meant to mirror the audience at which these novels are aimed: not just young women who are middle-class or upwardly mobile Mexican-Americans, Nuyoricans, Cuban-Americans, and so on, but who are also negatively invested in largely clichéed notions of “authentic” ethnicity such as speaking Spanish, eating ethnic food, or having what amount to stock characters as family members (for instance, the abuela who’s always cooking, the over-solicitous mother, the drug-dealing cousin). Indeed, such ideas of ethnic identity (3) are apparently taken as authentic, if oppressive, cultural markers by chica lit authors and their characters, who often complain of feeling alienated by them: as chica lit author Mary Castillo tells it, “I realized that there are a lot of women like me who aren’t bilingual.... Their moms don’t make tortillas.... It made me realize, yeah, I’m a part of this culture. I’m not totally separate” (3). The rejection of what is seen as an older, less assimilated ethnicity, then, also requires the embrace of a specifically middle-class set of values for ethnic success. For example, Castillo’s Mexican-American character Isela Vargas, in Castillo’s short story “My Favorite Mistake,” informs her readers that “In college, I was laughed away from the MEChA table at Freshmen Orientation for not speaking Spanish. I showed them and joined the Latino Business Student Association” (16). (4)

In their Latina/o Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature Raphael Dallego and Elena Sáez discuss “the relationship between the Latina/o subject and the processes of commodification” (112); they argue that marketing—especially that which is aimed at “Hispanic” demographics—“has been and remains foundational in the development of [a Latina/o] imaginary” (114). Along these same lines, I argue that chica lit constructs and reproduces a Latina/o subject who is called—advised might be a better term—to actively participate in the processes by which ethnicity is commodified. Against the idea that specific cultural requirements (like speaking Spanish) are necessary for an authentic ethnic self, narratives like Castillo’s often suggest how women can overcome the question of whether they are “Latina enough” and achieve a comfortable ethnic identity, romance, and material success via a discourse of the middle-class citizen-consumer. Indeed in chica lit, ethnicity is proved to be fully covalent with middleclass success. Furthermore, the young woman becomes enfranchised—finds her identity specifically as “American”—via a commodified vision of
As Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai maintain in their study of South Asian-American chick-lit novels, in "women of color subgenres such as Chica Lit and Sistah Lit ... the characters' engagements with femininity and gender are often articulated through questions of race, nation, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class" (4). However, in chica lit, these articulations are also constrained by the formulaic requirements of a combination of genres. Such requirements, as we will see, help to drive this subgenre's conservative ideological standpoint. In this essay, then, I am interested in how chica lit novels, specifically ones with Mexican-American protagonists, use certain generic formulae to show how to "do" a gendered ethnic identity within the socioeconomic constraints of United States middle-class, successful consumerism. How not to do ethnicity is demonstrated in a number of these novels, is represented by references to the 1970s Chicano/a working-class movimientos politics of resistance and authenticity: characters will make overtly scornful and/or denigrating remarks, as Lauren of Alisa Valdez-Rodriguez' Dirty Girls Social Club puts it, about "all that dated, 1970s Chicano movement, 'brown and proud,' West Coast Que viva la raza jive" (10). Connected to this strategy, these novels often structure explicitly invidious comparisons between a "culture of (ethnic) poverty" and successful assimilation.

As it does for "white chick lit," then, chica lit also enfolds aspects of its sister-genre, the coming-of-age narrative. The Chicana coming-of-age genre constitutes another significant influence both on chick lit and chica lit. In fact, Butler and Desai maintain that "white chick lit" actually serves as Bildungsroman as well, in that these novels describe the coming of age of the modern subject and narrate the integration of the citizen-subject into the nation-state.... More specifically, the Bildungsroman traces the development and coming into maturation of the individual as she finds her proper location in community and society.... In modern Bildungsromans, this maturation is increasingly marked as the ability to adapt oneself to a globalized society, to gain entrance into a professional labor class and to access its corresponding bourgeois luxury and leisure consumption ... (15)

As the reader might intuit, the lineage of chica lit, like chick lit itself, derives much of its formulaic impetus from aspects of the contemporary romance novel. However, because it is a combination of several genres, in her essay "Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners" Stephanie Harzewski notes that chick lit also owes a debt to the "acknowledged predecessors" of authors such as Edith Wharton and Jane Austen. In this sense, Harzewski maintains, chick lit "revisits the 'class without money' conflict that pervades the novel of manners tradition ... [and] domestic fiction's marriage plot, chronicling the heroines' fortune on the marriage market and assessing contemporary courtship behavior, dress, and social motives" (41). Yet, if we are to look to the motivations and restrictions of genre in our analysis of gender and race in chica lit, we find that besides the romance and the novel of manners, the coming-of-age genre constitutes another significant influence both on chick lit and chica lit. In this sense, then, chica lit's close ties to the Chicana Bildungsroman, one which is concerned with acculturation into a successful, bourgeois subject. As we will see, ultimately, the tensions inherent in negotiating a resistant and gendered ethnic identity in turn-of-the-century United States is resolved in chica lit novels by an explicit evocation of any critique of "Americanization" or of assimilation from its narrative conclusions.

NO PLACE IN WHITENESS: THE CHICANA/O BILDUNGSROMAN

"... in [chica lit] they're trying to balance their ethnicity and being American. How can you be both?" Mary Castillo, "Chica Lit"

The ways in which people of color are called to assimilate into successful, middle-class lives are numerous and ever-changing; yet for feminist writer bell hooks, assimilation requires a price: "[w]hat must be sacrificed ... is that which has no place in whiteness" (346). As hooks also makes clear, however, whiteness is intimately linked to the consumer marketplace. As we will see, in the popular imagination of early twenty-first century United States, ethnic poverty, affective ties to "othered" cultural customs, unashamed darkness of skin or thick accents, and even resistance to heterosexual hegemony must often, if not always, be sacrificed for upward mobility as well as for full enfranchisement as a citizen-consumer. Indeed the generic assumptions of the Bildungsroman, as Jeffrey Sammons notes, still have "something to do with Bildung, that is, with the early bourgeois, humanistic concept of the shaping of the individual self ... through acculturation ... to the threshold of maturity" (qtd in Japtok 28). Thus the traditional coming-of-age narratives would seem to require some sacrifice, with its bourgeois emphasis on the assimilation of the individual into a larger society (Japtok 22). Yet, especially in the United States, the coming of age novel has been and continues to be a favored genre for ethnic authors...
since at least the first decades of the twentieth century. Ethnic coming of age novels have often represented, and attempted to negotiate, the tensions inherent in a culture which demands the ethnic person's abandonment of links to the "old country" (and sometimes to the first generation as representatives of the old country) as a necessity for inclusion and participation in United States citizenship and society. They have also worked as imaginative documents of how young ethnic people could move away from repressive, old country ideas and values and into the new, seemingly limitless freedom of "becoming American." Most importantly, the ethnic Bildungsroman has often served a political function for mainstream readers: to follow the young, often second-generation character's journey to adulthood as it is mapped onto an imagined political journey of assimilation, citizenship, and eventual mainstream success. That is, the youthful second (or even third or fourth) generation can stand in, via synecdoche, for an entire "ethnic" group, while the character's coming of age into adulthood can stand in for the group's maturation into fully-enfranchised and American consumers.

Particularly in the years during and after the height of Black and Chicano nationalism, the ethnic coming-of-age novel itself underwent some changes. Most salient was the fact that many of these stories now acknowledged that brown and black people, by reason of their inability to "become white," might always have difficulty in gaining full enfranchisement. As Estuvo puts it, During the twentieth century ... the process of development has been increasingly characterized by disillusionment and confrontation with a hostile environment ... uncertainties of contemporary life are often reflected in the often indeterminate endings,... in which social integration is only obtained through some kind of compromise (10).

Yet, at the same time, most of these narratives have also been invested to some extent in demanding Chicano/a sociopolitical enfranchisement within the United States. Rudolfo Anaya, for example, maintained that "I believe that Chicano literature is ultimately a part of U.S. literature.... I do not believe that we have to be swallowed up ... within contemporary U.S. literature. We can present our own perspective.... But ultimately it will be incorporated into the literature of this country" (Bruce-Novoa 190) (168), Cisneros's House on Mango Street ends with the promise that the character, Esperanza, will "make it" out of the barrio to, presumably, some kind of success: "Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free.... One day I will pack my bags of books and paper.... I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away" (110). However, as Karafillis notes, Cisneros makes an important intervention into her own gesture toward socioeconomic mobility: "instead of signifying the freedom to journey and conjuging the image of forward-moving progress, Cisneros reinforces the importance of community and returning." (68).

Thus, Esperanza's last words in the novel are "...I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind...") (110). In this way, many Chicano coming of age narratives have offered a pointed critique of what becoming a successful American (in all the senses of that phrase) might mean for Chicanas/os; and even more specifically, Chicana authors like Sandra Cisneros point to how gender, ethnicity, and sexuality interlock to make the entrance into full enfranchisement an ongoing negotiation. Thus, the original focus of the Bildungsroman on a (masculine) growing into—and, essentially, assimilating into—the masculiner world outside the home underwent sometimes radical revision. From early works like Rudolfo Anaya's 1972 Bless Me, Ultima to twenty-first century novels like Cisneros' 2002 Caramelo, the Chicana/o coming of age novel has often been imaginatively bookended by a discourse of resistance to racism and sexism which encompasses both claims to rights and citizenship at the same time as it demonstrates the ways sociopolitical enfranchisement has been and continues to be denied to men and women of color.

What is interesting, then, about the growing popularity of chica lit, is that it does indeed share some concerns with its much more radical sister-genre, the late twentieth-century ethnic coming-of-age novel. The question of ethnic identity remains a central, if not single, theme for the young women characters of chicita lit who, if not in their adolescence, are still young enough (usually in their twenties) to feel the need for some kind of negotiation between their social and professional worlds and their Latina identity. In an interview, for example, Mary Castillo discussed what she saw as the difference between chicita lit and chicita lit: "Family is always involved somehow," she explains. "Unlike early ethnic chicita lit that kind of created the image that it's always about single women worrying about their shoes, in the ethnic books they're trying to balance their ethnicity and being American. How can you be both? The issues seem to be a little deeper" ("Chica Lit"). And in fact, "how can you be both" ethnic and American has been central to Chicana/o movimiento discourses from the 1960s through the 1980s; for example, one of several threads in Chicano cultural nationalist rhetoric involved an emphasis on, and reclamation of, the Chicano's "Aztec roots, at once a radical repudiation of white supremacy and a claiming of a "homeland," Aztlán, within the larger nation-state. Indeed, such a radicalized reclamation of identity is taken up in chicita lit, but only within the context of an invidious comparison. So, for instance, when Dirty Girl's Mexican-American character Amber assumes the Nahualit name Cuicatl and begins to campaign for Native American awareness through her life and music, Lauren mocks her efforts:

I call Amber at home. She answers her phone in a language I've never heard before, I'm assuming it's Nahuatl ... "Hey, Amber, it's me, Lauren." "Please call me Cuicatl," she says. "That's my new name. I'm not a part-time Indian, so don't treat me like one." At this point, Lauren thinks, "Humorless as always," and says to Cuicatl, "I would if I could pronounce it, okay, girl? ... She doesn't laugh. Ever since she got caught up in all this Mexica movement stuff she hasn't seemed to have much of a sense of humor." (288)

As Debra Castillo notes in her brilliant essay "Impossible Indian," the novel presents Cuicatl/Amber's devotion to her Native American roots as "comically exaggerated" (52), ensuring that the reader knows not to take her seriously. As Castillo notes, Cuicatl/Amber is taken up with the question of (historical) cultural authenticity: "For Amber, the goal of dominant culture to 'disappear us' and the claim of a "homeland," Aztlán, within the larger nation-state. Indeed, such a radicalized reclamation of identity is taken up in chicita lit, but only within the context of an invidious comparison. So, for instance, when Dirty Girl's Mexican-American character Amber assumes the Nahual name Cuicatl and begins to campaign for Native American awareness through her life and music, Lauren mocks her efforts:

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The gulf in what Anaya called “the literature of this country” between “serious” and “popular” ethnic fiction is, at this point, deep and wide. Many, if not most, readers come to canonical Chicana/o books as students in high school or in university ethnic studies courses, rather than as browsers in their local Barnes and Noble, Books-a-Million, or Amazon.com. Thus, while canonical coming-of-age novels such as Bless Me, Ultima and House on Mango Street still remain on myriad Chicana/o and ethnic studies syllabi, continue to be published not just in book form but on CDs, and are the subject of myriad study guides, unit plans, companions, and CliffNotes, their thematic of negotiating a resistant identity has, as we have seen, mutated on its way to the popular marketplace. Since the 2003 publication of Alisa ValdezRodriguez’s breakthrough novel The Dirty Girls Social Club (often hailed in the industry as the “Latina” Waiting to Exhale), publisher’s imprints like St. Martin’s Griffin, HarperCollins’ series Avon Trade (“because every great bag deserves a great book!”), and Penguin’s Berkeley Books have begun to put out a growing number of chica lit titles. I maintain that it is within the twinned constraints of market forces and genre formulae from whence arises the requirement to reject, particularly for young women, ethnic discourses of resistance. As we will see, such constraints signal how, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the discovery and maintenance of ethnic identity is not just the province of the canonical works and authors embraced by ethnic studies programs, but more and more often, re-packaged and merchandise via patriarchal discourses of romance and consumerism, the arena of a popular culture directed at young Latinas.

IS IT THE POVERTY? CHICA LIT AND CONSUMER CULTURE

“I just want to see what these guys are all about. What drives them? Is it the poverty?... What does being Mexican really mean?” Marcela, from Becoming Latina

As we are beginning to see, the category of chica lit often combines at least three generic formulas: the coming of age novel, the romance novel, and “career girl” fiction, and grew out of the explosion of “girlfriend” and “career girl” novels (and television shows as well as movies) in the 1990s, such as British author Helen Fielding’s 1996 Bridget Jones’ Diary and American writer Candace Bushnell’s 1997 Sex and the City. These are narratives in which, as Deborah Philips notes in her essay “Shopping for Men: The Single Woman Narrative,” the narrator “will often deliberately distance the heroine from any suggestion of feminism, while simultaneously endorsing her successful career.... Female friendship is instead expressed in terms of shared tastes and consumption patterns” (247); indeed, a distinguishing mark of such novels are their endless lists of consumer accoutrements which their women characters both desire and often are able to purchase: Armani suits, Donna Karan dresses, Manolo Blahnik shoes, Fendi handbags, silver BMW sedans. At the same time, this formula appeared in the African-American publishing market with Terry McMillan’s astonishingly popular Waiting to Exhale (made into a movie in 1995), followed by the 1996 How Stella Got Her Groove Back, itself subsequently filmed in 1998. Alisa Valdez-Rodriguez’ Dirty Girls’ Social Club, like Waiting, chronicles how its circle of women friends, some of whom have been poor but all of whom now have, or shortly will have, successful careers, still cannot seem to find the “right man.” But a significant difference exists: Waiting to Exhale focused on the class differences of five Black women friends—waiting-for-the-right-man, whereas Dirty Girls goes pluralistic with five girlfriends from different “Hispanic” groups, including women characters who are, variously, Puerto Rican, Dominican-American, and Mexican-American; this is a strategy adopted by at least one other chicana lit author, Sofia Quintero, in her 2006 Divas Don’t Yield. Like the conflicting demands of financial independence and domestic bliss confronted by the women in Philips’ “single woman” narratives, the reader of Dirty Girls also understands that “Consumption is offered ... as a means of reconciling these conflicting demands and of achieving a resolution; the ... contemporary woman is presented with an array of options, consumer choices” (249). Yet as I have noted, the values of a consumer “lifestyle” are not merely presented as good in and of themselves; rather, they are set against, and in stark contrast to, the presumed values and lives particularly of poor and working-class Latin Americans and Latinos/as. Lauren, for example, advises us at the beginning of Dirty Girls that she and her girlfriends are not the “stereotypical” Latinas her editor presumably imagines: “brown of face and hair, uniformly uneducated, swarming across the border ... with all their belongings in plastic grocery bags” (7). Instead, she insists, the women are “all professionals,” not like those downtrodden chicks in the novels of those old-school Chicana writers, you know the ones; they wait table and watch old Mexican movies.... they ... clean toilets with their fingernails coated in Ajax; their WalMart polyester pants smell like tamales ...” (17)

The reader with “inside” knowledge will know that this reference is to that “old-school” Chicana writer Denise Chavez, author of Loving Pedro Infante, The Last of the Menu Girls, and Face of an Angel) (17). Here, the middleclass values of the sucias (indeed, some of them are outright rich, though their tastes are often more mass-market than those of the truly wealthy) make it necessary for them to distinguish themselves from poor or working-class Latinos/Chicanas; by implication, then, poor Latinos are poor because they have not tried hard enough. Nor does Valdes-Rodriguez put aside such comments in her second book, Playing With Boys. Here, the Tejana protagonist Alexis is a Southern Methodist University graduate and self-described “sorority sister” publicist. When she invites a well-known band called, in the book, Los Chimpanztes del Norte to a benefit (and here the insider will understand her to be referencing the real-life and extraordinarily successful conjunto Los Tigres del Norte), she is horrified to see that they have refused to wear the Armani suits she picked out for them and instead are wearing their own down-market clothes, complete with enormous Mexican-flag belt buckles. When she protests to Filoberto, the band leader, this dialog ensues:

Filoberto stared hard into my eyes. 'Look,' he said, in the perfect English he often pretended he didn't speak.... Mexicans gave us the money.... we owe our careers to Mexicans. We are Mexicans. And we're not going to dress like gringos just to make your little ooh-ooh friends here comfortable* (7)

Although this sounds as though either Alexis herself or the authorial voice may actually be making a move toward a resistant cultural autonomy, Filoberto’s position is immediately undercut by Alexis’ inner thoughts as she walks away: “Blah, blah, blah. Filoberto still thought we were fighting the Alamo” (7). The reader can already tell that Filoberto is not to be taken seriously; the fact that he can speak English but often pretends not to indicates a faux authenticity, he and his band dress in a ridiculous manner, and, after all, his band calls itself the “Chimpanzeez of the North.” This same reader thus understands clearly that her reading sympathies must lie with Alexis, whose only moment of pride in being Mexican was “when Vincente Fernández sang 'Cielito Lindo' for the Republican Convention in 2000” (1).

Consumption, class, and poverty are presented a bit differently through the Mexican-American character of Becoming Latina in Ten Easy Steps, Marcela. As we saw at the beginning of this essay, Marcela is presented as casting about in various amusing or clueless directions for ways to “become Latina” and accomplish the tasks she sets herself—particularly number one, “Date Mexican men” (22). Name-brand-dropping goes on, mostly to assert Marcela’s success: she drives a BMW, she is the top animator at her company, and, as one of the things on her ethnic to-do list, she has enough money to hire a chef to personally teach her how to cook Mexican food.
As Philips points out, consumption in these novels is often not merely confined to objects, but extends to men: “Shopping for men ... is both about employing consumer skills in order to identify (or even create) an appropriate partner,... but also the opportunity to select from a range of different men” (240). Yet the formula chica lit follows, borrowed from romance novels, requires that the reader "know," or at least be able to guess with some certainty, certain outcomes before the character. As we have seen, the search for an ethnic identity will lead chicana characters to "shop around" for suitably ethnic men; in many chicana lit novels, the reader will intuit ahead of the character that the man that character initially chooses and then at first discards (resulting in the formulaic back-and-forth of misread intentions and hurt feelings) will in fact be the right one because he is either too middle-class and not ethnic enough, or in a kind of reversal, he is not suitable because he is too ethnic, that is, poor (he is a ghetto drug dealer, for example). Thus, when Marcela decides she must "shop around" for the man who will make her more Latina, she is initially attracted to George "from accounting" who is "Mexican. I think... he's cute, single, and dresses neat" (30). However, she discovers that George will not do for her task to become more Latina, since he doesn't speak Spanish and is "way too Americanized. He couldn't wow my family with revolutionary talk of Aztec kings" (120). The savvy romance reader will know immediately that sexy George will be the right one for Marcela, for only because he is so middle-class and "Americanized" in the first place. But instead, and against the warnings of her best friend, she decides to make a date with a "dangerous" Chicano gang member, a vato loco.

Although Dirty Girls' Laurenopa seems to present the opposite scenario--she first dates Mexican-American Ed because he didn't complain about oppression and imperialism all the time. He was the first Chicano I'd known who had zero interest in lowriders or big graffiti murals" (140)--and only afterwards does she, like Marcela, test the limits of her distaste for poverty by having an affair with an Afro-Dominican drug dealer, Amaury, as she says, "I tell [the girlfriends] about my increasing curiosity in the kind of dangerous prettyboy tiges that roam the streets,... I tell them of my dream of saving one of them, him a professional..." (36). Saved or not, the figure of ghetto or barrio poverty these characters represent demonstrates the association in these novels of actually poor Chicanos/Latinos with what anthropologist Oscar Lewis first called the "culture of poverty," an theory which has subsequently been used to suggest that poor people stay poor because they have created, and accept, a "culture" which consciously rejects success and embraces criminality. Although her best girlfriend calls her crazy and reminds her "that most women try to escape this kind of man," Marcela's decision in Becoming Latina to date a vato loco is presumably an effort to understand what she thinks are "real Chicanos" (who she describes as "Dark, muscular, hot guys who could easily fulfill a girl's wildest fantasies..." (65). She thinks, "I just want to see what these guys are all about. What drives them? Is it the poverty? Is it a sense of not belonging to society? ... maybe if I can date and understand a real Chicano, I can better understand my culture... What does being Mexican really mean?" (67-68).

Getting know, and in the process reshaping, the barrio character need not happen only with men in these novels: as part of her search for an ethnic identity, Marcela decides to mentor an "at-risk" Mexican-American girl, Lupe Perez, although her efforts are almost foiled by the girl's Mexican mother, who accuses Marcela of making the girl ashamed of her mother. Marcela thinks to herself, "So, what, she wants to keep her daughter poor and uneducated so that she will not look down on her mother? I don't get it" (224). After a rocky start, however, Marcela indeed succeeds in lifting the young barrio girl from poverty (Lara Rios' next novel, the 2006 Becoming Americaana, chronicles Lupe's own coming-of-age into what Rios calls Americanization despite the fact that Lupe is, of course, already American). Similarly, in Dirty Girls, Lauren's girlfriend Amber gets Amaury a straight job promoting her new album, which leads to a job offer from the "head of Latin marketing for Wagner" records (305). As with Lupe, Americanization is sure to follow material success: at the end of the novel, Lauren muses, "I like Amaury. I'm just not sure I love him ... am I scared because ... I really ought to admit to what I am--a middle-class American ...? Amaury's a good guy ... Maybe Amaury is American too" (304).

These novels' embeddedness in discourses of enfranchisement via consumption and commodification ensures that their characterizations of what amounts to a Latino "culture of poverty" will evacuate any attempt at a structural analysis of ethnic oppression and discrimination, substituting instead a clichéd ethos of "hard work" and "getting ahead" (Lauren says, "I've never seen a person work as hard as [Amaury] does" [304]). Mary Castillo's Hot Tamara, on the other hand, presents a slightly different take on ethnic working-class "values"; nevertheless, it is one which ultimately comes back to the chica lit valorization of ethnicity via hard work and romantic and material success.

In Hot Tamara (the paperback cover of which asks, "What's life without a little spice?")Tamara Contreras lives in a small town about two hours away from Los Angeles, and longs to get away from her (relatively) financially secure, Mexican-American family and their distinctly Mexican-American, working-class ideas of proper behavior for women: they--most specially her mother--want her to give up ideas of going to college, marry her conservative, straight-arrow Mexican-American childhood sweetheart, and teach at the local high school. She is also required to serve her younger brother at the table, and it is assumed that she will help put him through business school. Here, the emphasis is not on consumerism--in fact, Tamara doesn't mind being situationally "poor" while she tries to get started on her dream, which is to own a gallery--but on the very bourgeois notions of success held by her overly ethnic, working-class family (her father is a mechanic; her mother teaches at the local school). The novel is, at heart, about the ethnic, working-class ideas of what the signs of a middle-class success are, set against a more bohemian aspiration for the signs of artistic cultural capital. We first understand the "tackiness" of her family's class aspirations when Tamara contemplates her freedom (she gets her period and realizes she won't be forced to marry because she's pregnant) while "Sitting in her Tía Yolanda's bathroom with goose-head faucets, antacid green walls, and pink towels with mermaids that looked like drag queens in shell bras" (1). As ranchero music plays in the backyard and her father and boyfriend speak Spanish so she won't understand what they're saying, Tamara tells the readers that being monolingual "was her Nana Rosa's fault ... who insisted ... that the family was New Mexican. No somos Mexicanos. You don't want them to be like those Mexicans who don't realize they're in America, her abuela would advise Mom while her cigarette spit ash onto the urine yellow shag carpet" (5). Tamara is supposed to represent the generation which has been encouraged to assimilate into mainstream America while staying close to the family, almost always signaled by their inability to speak Spanish. Although they are plenty "ethnic," it is a certain cultural capital which Tamara's Mexican-American family lacks, and which they constantly though mistakenly pursue. The narrative drops clues as to the family's tacky aspirations as well as to their true socioeconomic class throughout the novel, from the Tiffany bracelets Tamara's mother always wears even while cooking in the kitchen, to the dining room table "that was reported to have traveled across the Atlantic with their Spanish ancestors. But when Tamara had looked, she saw the Sears Roebuck warranty tag stapled on the bottom" (5). In novels such as these where class aspirations and the meanings attached to them are often confused, Philips notes, it is a rich signal to the reader, if not at first to the main character, who the final "correct" romantic choice will be: "The hero and heroine's partnership is destined in an alliance of ... (243). For Tamara a successful ethnic identity will ultimately be arrived at via Will Benavides, a Mexican-American former Marine and firefighter who also, as it happens, is an artist. When Benavides (who has for years nursed a secret love for Tamara) learns she wants to be a gallery owner, he muses, "Never in a million years would he have believed he and Tamara Contreras shared something in common" (29). In spite of this sign of their future destiny together, the romantic obstacle is again, at least in Benavides' mind, his (former) class status: growing up, "he lived in a foster home and his mom was a drug addict and his dad was doing thirty at San Quentin" (30). Yet because of his move "out of the ghetto" and into the Marines and firefighting, Benavides' origins in the barrio can be converted through his apparently considerable artistic talent first into cultural capital and ultimately into...
financial success as an artist, ensuring that however damaged by the barrio's presumed culture of poverty, his masculine prerogative to a higher economic status than his mate is restored and indeed takes priority (his paintings sell at the gallery where Tamara serves, as she puts it, as a "glorified secretary"). Will, Amaury, Armando (Marcela's vato loco), and Lupe Perez are, like the Dirty Girls barrio-raised, Afro-Puerto Rican character Usnavys (named after a U.S. military carrier), characters whose "movin' on up" class desires—or lack of them, like Armando the vato loco and Lupe's Mexican mother—indicate certain things to the Latina reader. These characters teach her that a coming-of-age into material and ethnic success for women must be achieved against the presumed reality of a "culture" of poverty as well as in opposition to the misplaced aspirations of the stiffly ethnic, working-class family. This rejection calls for the substitution of a more modern, often urban, sophisticated and ethnic coupledom: for example, in Hot Tamara Will Benavides' ethnicity is evoked mostly through his name, his paintings of his time (now in the past) in the barrio, and his "adopted" abuelita, Señora Allende, with whom he speaks Spanish and who deeds her house to him as "the son she'd never had." Deborah Phillips points out that in novels like these, the women characters express an expectation that [they] be treated equally, while denying that there is any political dimension to that demand....

Despite their assertions of the right to a career and independent income, there is a very traditional fantasy of femininity in these novels. (247-248)

Such denial takes on a two-fold dimension in chicana lit: on the one hand, the right to a certain amount of independence is taken for granted without any discussion of the ways women have worked to overcome gender oppression. On the other, the presumed freedom these women have to pick and choose such markers of ethnicity as are both desired and proper to a certain class status denies both the structural and ongoing nature of racial oppression in the U.S. The relative ease with which these characters effect their class mobility, and the ways in which this ease denies how generational poverty renders such mobility a much more slippery and two-way street, works to erase critical thought. Indeed, the romance formula of these novels means that the very independence the women characters take for granted is presented as always open to the probability of the woman character's recuperation into marriage and a family. It is often at the moment the "perfect" mate understands the main character's desire for independence that these novels' main characters, like Tamara, realize what they've "always" wanted: "I want to stay here in L.A. And I want to live together in this house with you".... There, she said it. And lightning didn't strike. Feminists didn't storm the house" (245). Both genre formulas and the privileging of assimilation work to reconcile and smooth over the "material contradictions in the expectations of femininity" (Phillips 249) present in contemporary culture, as they work to reorient expectations of ethnicity toward a more commodified subjectivity.

AN AGENT, A DEAL AND A GREATER CONNECTION TO HER ROOTS: THE AUTHORS

Underscoring these novels' focus specifically on negotiating ethnic (Chicana/a) ideas of resistance and self-determination, not all the women who have Mexican American protagonists are in fact Mexican American themselves. For example, Lara Rios is from an Argentinian family but was born in the United States, although her books Becoming Latina in Ten Easy Steps and Becoming Americana are both about young Mexican-American women; Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez' father is a Pedro Pan Cuban, that is someone who was born in Cuba but was sent as a child to the United States in the early 1960s on the so-called "Peter Pan" flights. Indeed Valdes-Rodriguez' first novel's narrator, as we have seen, is Lauren, who is half "New Jersey Cuban" on her father's side and, on her mother's, white trash "[like] the kind you see on Cops, where the guy is ... covered in swastika tattoos and crying because the police blew up his meth lab" (6); while her second novel, Playing with Boys, uses a Tejana narrator. Of the books I have discussed here, only Hot Tamara was written by self-proclaimed "fourth-generation Mexican-American" author Mary Castillo.

Because these novels include aspects of the coming-of-age narrative but at heart belong to the contemporary romance genre, publishers, authors, and readers alike have been able to take up, and expand on, the romance novel industry's amazing array of marketing tools. The novels themselves often contain question-figuring guidelines for reader's groups; online publishers' as well as fan websites provide information and reviews about the books as well as about their authors; excerpts of the novels are released online, reader's book clubs are solicited and formed, sometimes online, and every author has her own blog. As Harzewski notes, the "commodity roots" of these novels go "beyond an interest in fashion to a full-fledged embracing of commercialism.... For instance ... Ford Motor Company made a deal with best-selling chick-lit author Carole Matthews to feature one of its cars in her novel The Sweetest Taboo" (35). Valdes-Rodriguez is perhaps one of the savviest of current chicana lit authors in this area: in addition to maintaining film and television rights to her books and producing a faux blog about a Latina actress, she has teamed up with partylaunch.com to promote her books via Tupperware-like promotional parties. According to the company's website, Valdes-Rodriguez "used her own web site, her blog, a clever contest, pre-launch interviews and more.... some of the parties pre-launch sipping, 'Sex and the City' themes"; for her sequel to Dirty Girls Social Club, a book called Dirty Girls on Top, book parties automatically entered guests to win "a trip to the Fairmont Princess Resort to have lunch with Alisa" and were sponsored by Southwest Airlines, People en Español, and Barnes and Noble ("Book Parties Generate Publicity").

Although none of these tools for marketing say much substantive about the authors or their books, they are helpful in showing how both author and book are wrapped and marketed to young second-, third-, or even fourth-generation women who perhaps also don't feel "Latina" enough and who additionally might feel conflicts between striving for material success and the rights to autonomy advocated both by feminist as well as ethnic minorities. For example, as an interview with her says, Mary Castillo was "raised by parents who encouraged individualism. Still, she found herself stuck between cultures as a Latina who doesn't speak Spanish" When she sent her first manuscript out to publishers, a comment that the novel wasn't "Latina enough" sent her back to sprinkle in "Spanish adages she found in a book called "Old Spanish Sayings" ... She even subscribed to Latina magazine" (Tulabut 3) A discourse of "roots" and "heritage" is important in the selling both of these authors as well as their books, and each biography and many interviews make a careful point to emphasize it. However, this emphasis on knowing one's "roots" poses something of a double bind: although the books and their authors achieve success specifically because they are presumably "Latina," at the same time the market "demographic" is clearly thought to be middle-class, assimilated women who themselves are believed to be ambivalent about what "Latina" really means. Mary Castillo's "Chica Lit" interview, for example, goes on to say that after her first attempts at publishing she "eventually landed an agent, a deal with Avon Books and a greater connection to her roots" (3). Similarly, Lara Rios' website (which incidentally names Bless Me, Ultima as one of her "favorite books," describes her as having the misfortune of growing up away from the extended family that is so valued in the Latin culture, but missed out on very little of what it means to be Argentine. Asados were sacred meals shared together on weekends. Cheering for the Argentine soccer team was a must, as were the weekly pilgrimages to the Argentine Club in Los Angeles ...
the recent practice of deporting young, American-born Latinos to their parent's countries of origin:

I came across an interesting article called Deporting the American dream [sic]...Curious, I read it, and found it was about the Salvadoran deportees, and their re-acclituration into Salvadoran society.... mostly the article talks about how they have taken American ways back to their country.... But what are these "American ways"? A gang culture. Tattoos and hip hop. This is what they took back" ("What is the American Dream?")

Rios continues, "Used to be that people would think of progress, and a positive work ethic when they thought of America. When my father would think about returning to Argentina ... the things he knew he would miss were things like being able to get a job... or having access to the newest and best technology" ("What is?"). Such comments illuminate the characters of Rios' books; for example, when How to Become Latina's Marcela asks her "Chicana activist" Aunt Lydia tell her "what the Chicano movement is all about" and her aunt replies, "[Chicanas] continue to... make sure no one forgets that this is our homeland" Marcela thinks, "She wasn't going to get agreement from me on this point. That California was once part of Mexico in the early 1800s had little to do with our life today. To me this was my homeland... It's part of America--my country" (128). Of the three authors discussed here, Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez has the most complex online, authorial identity. Her politics and commentaries are often liberal, and she avoids much of the "heritage" discourse common to other sites; in fact, she has been accused of not wanting to be called a "Latina" author, a charge she denies. Yet she highlights the ways Latina authors are often pigeonholed by emphasizing a rhetoric of "Americanness" over ethnic identity, as here, where she answers a question about how her novels are received outside of the United States, where she gets to be an 'American writer,' whereas here in America, my home nation, where I write in my native tongue about Americans, I am still set apart by booksellers, the media, average readers and academic readers alike.... Funny how in the USA we allow cities and states to have Spanish names and be American but we do not extend this same courtesy to our denizens. ("Interview with Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez")

It should not be surprising that publishers, looking to reach the widest possible audience, play down the more obviously or resistantly "ethnic" aspects of U.S. Chicano and Latina identity, and especially want to avoid any possible connection in the minds of readers with resistant ethnic claims. Thus it makes sense that the novelists I talk about here all frame their rejection of a radical or even reformist ethnic stance by way of making disparaging comments about Chicanos and/or the Chicano movimiento. The writers themselves tend to reconstitute the demand for assimilation by a white, patriarchal supremacy as, instead, the inclusiveness of a pluralistic nation where working hard is the only requirement for success.

One may wonder, then, why I am even interested in teaching such novels. Although a writer like Valdes-Rodriguez can be very funny, for the most part these books are not well-written and frankly their politics are deeply conservative (Valdes-Rodriguez claims a liberal politics, and is supportive of many causes that would be labeled as such). Yet I want to call for the inclusion of popular U.S. Latina/o cultural artifacts, including chica lit, both in classrooms and in academic U.S. Latina/o and Chican/a studies. The range of fiction on many contemporary Chicano studies syllabi, for example, is extremely narrow. In my informal Google survey of Chicano literature syllabi from 2001 to 2008, no syllabus I found included more than five novels; and of those five, around 90% of the syllabi listed Cisneros' House on Mango Street; the majority also included an earlier coming-of-age novel, Tomás.Rivera's Y no se lo tragó la tierra, Anaya's Bless Me Ultima, and Luis Rodriguez' Always Running: La Vida Loca. Looking at these syllabi, one might come to the conclusion that Chicano/a studies itself is too narrowly focused on a handful of books which, however important we might think they are to conceptions of Chicano/a identity, seem to hover in a rarified atmosphere above the popular marketplace. ERIC, for example, an online digital library of education research and information sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, calls Cisneros' House on Mango Street "Already a fixture in many high school English classes." Looking at Amazon.com customer reviews can also be an informal but informative snapshot of marketplace popularity: Dirty Girls, published in 2003, in 2008 had 156 customer reviews as compared to Anaya's 1973 Bless Me, Ultima, coming in at 192 reviews. These are obviously not formal statistics, but they are, I believe, telling in that they show a fairly narrow conception of what "the Chicano experience" is both in and outside the academy. What I call for instead is a literary/cultural studies curriculum which gestures both ways: both toward the serious and often resistant Chicano/a and U.S. Latina/o literature we feel students should have an opportunity to read, and toward the popular fiction which we know many of our students, Latinas and otherwise, are picking up from the bookshelves at Barnes and Noble. Reading these novels critically--and understanding that subgenres like chica lit are also instrumental in the imagining of Chicana and U.S. Latina identity--allow my students, both white and of color, to begin to see and to form critiques about the ways women of color especially are hailed by the marketplace at the same time as they are required to sacrifice a resistant identity as the price for entrance into the pleasures of inhabiting a fully-enfranchised, citizen-consumer subject position.

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It is apparently common for chica lit author’s names not to use accents (strictly speaking, this means they are spelled incorrectly). I am following their own spellings of their names. Additionally, it is common for the Spanish “sprinkled” through these novels to be both ungrammatical incorrectly spelled, and also lack the appropriate accents.

Properly speaking, a real-life Marcela would more likely identify herself as a Mexican, Mexicana, or Mexican-American, especially in a household where the parents pride themselves on their Mexican heritage, as is the case in this novel. She might have called herself “Chicana,” like her “activist” aunt, but most chica lit authors are careful to avoid any hint of politicization on the part of their characters. Thus, many “chica lit” novels will lump all women of Latin American heritage under the rubric “Latina.”

See, for example, Suzanne Bost’s “Women and Chile at the Alamo: Feeding U.S. Colonial Mythology.”

MECHA, or Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan, is a politicized student movement which traces its foundation to the Chicano formulation of El Plan de Santa Bárbara in 1969 (“About Us”).

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