

End of *Chicanismo*: Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez's Dirty Girls

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Abstract

This essay explores the ways in which Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez's Dirty Girls novels (2003, 2008) reconceive of *latinidad* (Latino-ness), not so much as a shared history or political strategy, but more as a marketing device. In my effort to make sense of their production and popularity in the early twenty-first century, a moment frequently characterized in terms of a series of "posts," I center Latinas in discussions of the postfeminist and post-racial, as well as in the context of chick lit, neoliberalism, and the Latin boom of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Drawing from various theories of *latinidad*, I examine the ways in which Valdes-Rodriguez and her chica lit have been marketed by their publishers and by Valdes-Rodriguez herself. I situate the author and her *oeuvre* at the end (terminus) and as an end (result) of second-wave feminism, the Chicano movement, and Chicana feminism as I expose their vexed relationship to these prior social movements. And I contend that, despite attempts to position Valdes-Rodriguez and her novels as mainstream or universal, their commodification underscores the continuing relevance, growing profitability, and new manageability of gender, racial, and ethnic differences in the United States.

Keywords

Chica lit, post-race, post-feminist, *Latinidad*, Latina, consumption, neoliberalism

End of *Chicanismo*: Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez's Dirty Girls

In 2003, a relatively unknown, unemployed, thirty-four-year-old reporter from Albuquerque named Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez caused a splash in the publishing world with The Dirty Girls Social Club (2003), a novel about a tight-knit group of exceptional Latinas. After sparking a well-publicized half-a-million-dollar bidding war among publishers, the debut novel spent three months on the New York Times bestseller list and sold more than double its initial printing of 125,000 copies (Benke 2002, Seipp 2003, Smith 2003, Villagrán 2003). The “break-out literary star” has gone on to publish six novels in as many years, including Dirty Girls on Top (2008), the sequel to The Dirty Girls Social Club, and most recently, The Husband Habit (2009). A film adaptation of The Dirty Girls Social Club is scheduled for release in 2010.¹

Anointed in 2005 by Time magazine as one of “the twenty-five most influential Hispanics in America” and the “godmother of Chica Lit,” Valdes-Rodriguez has been credited with helping to usher in a new era in Latina literature, one defined in relation to chick lit and against works by a previous generation of Chicana writers (Miranda 2005).² Indeed, in what appears to be a snub of Sandra Cisneros’s celebrated novella The House on Mango Street (1984), Time magazine’s Carolina Miranda praises the Generation-X, up-and-coming novelist for rejecting “clichéd visions of grandmas, mangoes, and the sea” (ibid.).³ Instead, Valdes-Rodriguez’s works feature educated, professional, and fabulously wealthy Latina characters, including a magazine editor, news anchor, screenwriter, actress, and rock star. These *chicas* drive BMWs and Bentleys, wear Movados and Manolos, and live in posh Miami mansions or hip Hollywood bungalows.

Although there is some value in shattering hackneyed stereotypes of Latinas—for example, as maids, prostitutes, “illegal aliens,” or gangsters—I am troubled by the ways Valdes-Rodriguez’s *chica lit* reconceives of *latinidad* (“Latino-ness”), not so much as a shared history or political strategy, but more as a marketing device. Focusing on the Dirty Girls novels, this essay attempts to make sense of their production and popularity in the early twenty-first century, a moment frequently characterized in terms of a series of “posts,” such as post-race and postfeminism. Why has her work been so well received and by whom? What does it say to and about Latinas in the United States at this historical juncture, which has been defined, on the one hand, by the “posts” I just enumerated and, on the other, by an explosion in the marketing and consumption of *latinidad*, renewed assaults on immigration, and growing concern over what the late political scientist Samuel P. Huntington termed America’s “Hispanic challenge” (Huntington 2004a)? Where do Hispanics belong or intervene in discussions of the post-racial? And what does it mean for the United States to be post-racial at a moment when Latinas and Latinos have come to comprise the majority minority?

These questions were inspired not only by the increased circulation of the terms “post-race” and “postfeminism” in the mainstream U. S. media since the 1990s, but by my students as well, the majority of whom were born decades after the collective-identity social movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (namely, second-wave feminism and the Chicano movement). Most of these young women and men are reluctant to self-identify as feminist, and instead of embracing “Chicana” or “Chicano,” they call themselves Mexican, Mexican American, Latina, Latino, Salvadoran, American, or mixed-race, among other things.⁴ These myriad labels have prompted me to ask: What

do Valdes-Rodriguez's novels say about the past, present, and possible future of "Chicana" and feminism? What distinguishes her work from an earlier body of Chicana feminist literature? And is it Chicana or feminist?

To address these questions, I juxtapose the postfeminist and postracial so one may illuminate the other. Additionally, I locate these "posts," along with Valdes-Rodriguez's Dirty Girls series, in the context of the "chick lit pandemic" (Donadio 2006, 31), the so-called New (neoliberal) Economy, and the Latin boom of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Frank 2000). Drawing from various theories of *latinidad*, I examine the ways in which Valdes-Rodriguez and her novels have been marketed by their publishers and by Valdes-Rodriguez herself. I situate the author and her *oeuvre* at the end (terminus) and as an end (result) of second-wave feminism, the Chicano movement, and Chicana feminism as I expose their vexed relationship to these prior social movements. And I contend that, despite attempts to position Valdes-Rodriguez and her novels as mainstream or universal, their commodification underscores the continuing relevance, growing profitability, and new manageability of gender, racial, and ethnic differences in the United States.

Chick Lit and Feminisms

Generally speaking, chick lit refers to fiction by, for, and about women. Its protagonists tend to be single, female, educated, and urban twenty- or thirty-somethings concerned with sex or romance (usually heterosexual), body image, and career advancement. Terry McMillan's Waiting to Exhale (1992), Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones's Diary (1996), Candace Bushnell's Sex and the City (1997), Sophie Kinsella's Confessions of a

Shopaholic (2001), and Lauren Weisberger's The Devil Wears Prada (2003) are probably its most well-known titles.⁵

That each of these works has successfully made the leap from chick lit to chick flick is evidence of the genre's popularity and commercial success.⁶ Fans have described it as "hip," "smart," "fun," and, perhaps most tellingly, "all about you!" (Ferriss and Young 2006, 1). The genre's appeal lies in its putative ability to reflect "the lives of everyday working young women" (ibid., 3). Undeniably, some of the most popular chick-lit novels foreground very real challenges many women face, such as alienation in the workplace and the vexed connection between body image and physical and emotional well-being. Still, I find it strange that a genre inspired in great part by the romance, as well as the television sitcom, has been lauded as realist, rather than as fantasy, comedy, or satire.⁷

For evidence of the fantastic in chick lit, one need not look far. In Bridget Jones's Diary, the genre's most famous (if not infamous) exemplar, Bridget Jones, a lonely, thirty-something Londoner in search of Mr. Right, ends up being swept off her feet by the man of her dreams, Mark Darcy, a late twentieth-century incarnation of Pride and Prejudice's (1813) Fitzwilliam Darcy. Like the hero of Jane Austen's 1813 novel, Mark is wealthy, handsome, and well educated. Not only has he read Susan Faludi's Backlash, he even has an opinion about it. Ultimately, he singlehandedly pursues and captures the novel's villain—a swarthy, Latin shyster—then frees Bridget from both the clutches of spinsterhood and her irksome and dysfunctional family—on Christmas day, to boot. The novel concludes with Mark lifting a very giddy Bridget into his arms and carrying her to their four-poster bed at a five-star hotel.

While enthusiasts praise chick lit for its veracity and wit, detractors dismiss it as trite, unrealistic, humorless, insulting, and downright dangerous. A biting review of Bridget Jones's Diary in the New York Times describes that novel's bumbling, self-deprecating heroine as more pathetic than amusing: "Bridget is such a sorry spectacle, wallowing in her man-crazed helplessness, that her foolishness cannot be excused" (Kuczynski 1998). For some readers, chick lit is, at best, frivolous. It is a guilty pleasure, "a froth sort of thing," in the words of the venerable British novelist Beryl Bainbridge, (Smith 2008, 3). At worst, it is "a throw-back to pre-feminism" (Ferriss and Young 2006, 1).

Chick lit developed in the United Kingdom and United States during what may be described as a turning point, if not crisis, in British and American feminisms. The 1990s saw the emergence of postfeminism, a set of assumptions that aver that feminism has accomplished its goals and is now unnecessary, anachronistic, and even harmful, especially for its alleged victims: heterosexual men, whom feminism has rendered impotent and confused; children abandoned by their working mothers; and disillusioned women who strive in vain to "have it all" (with "all" generally referring to a rewarding career and nuclear family).⁸ Stories that cast doubt on feminist struggles and achievements, particularly those that blamed selfish, careerist women, rather than the exigencies of capitalism, for destroying the heteropatriarchal, all too often middle-class family, circulated in the mainstream U. S. media. Meanwhile, public intellectuals, such as Camille Pagila (1990), Katie Roiphe (1993), and Naomi Wolf (1993), underscored women's power over men.⁹ For many feminists, these assertions were evidence not so

much of feminism's obsolescence, but of a backlash against American women and feminism—namely second-wave feminism (Faludi 1991).

The final years of the last century were also marked by a spike in consumer spending and the aggressive interpellation of women as consumers, particularly of luxury goods and services, such as designer accessories and “personal services,” like spa treatments and weekly blowouts (a process in which one's hair is styled with a blow dryer at a salon).¹⁰ In keeping with the zeitgeist of the new Gilded Age, postfeminism constructed women as subjects of neoliberalism (Butler and Desai 2008, 7-8).¹¹ That is, it hailed “women as both subjects and consumers, or perhaps as subjects only to the extent that we [were] able and willing to consume,” by valorizing consumption as a means of agency and as a strategy for empowerment and transformation, particularly *self*-empowerment and personal, as opposed to collective, transformation (Tasker and Negra 2007, 8). “Fashion, spectacle, paparazzi-jammed galas, mindless sex talk—is this what the road map to greater female empowerment has become?” Ginia Bellafante asks sarcastically in “Feminism: It's All about Me!,” a Time magazine cover story lamenting and, at the same time, mocking feminism's putative demise (Bellafante 1998).

Critical of “a popular culture insistent on offering images of grown single women as frazzled, self-absorbed girls,” Bellafante takes direct aim at two avatars of postfeminism: Ally McBeal, the ditsy, lovelorn, scantily-clad heroine of the successful 1997-2002 Fox television series of the same name, and her literary counterpart across the Atlantic, Bridget Jones (Bellafante 1998). Indeed, hallmarks of postfeminism overlap with those of chick lit. Both stress consumption, taste, and lifestyle. They celebrate female sexuality (usually heterosexuality), beauty, and youth and are acutely age-

conscious. Above all, postfeminism and chick lit are concerned with the possible consequences of female independence, such as the emotional isolation often associated with being single and the difficulty of balancing a career with romance and, to a lesser extent, motherhood.

While the 1990s saw renewed attacks on feminism, the decade also witnessed its transformation and the emergence of third-wave feminism. Heralded as “‘the next generation’ of feminism,” self-professed third-wavers have emphasized youth and “organizing *young* [particularly Generation-X] feminists,” especially via, rather than in spite of, popular culture and the media, mainstream and alternative alike (Orr 1997, 30).¹² Brash and informal, many third-wavers, such as “riot grrls” and “girlies,” have called for a reexamination and reclamation of pornography, feminine accoutrements (for example, lipstick and high heels), and erstwhile pejoratives, like “girl” and “queer” (Gillis and Munford 2004, 171). They have grappled with feminism’s inconsistencies, with “the complexities and contradictions of applying feminist principles to...everyday li[fe],” often by honing in on the personal (at the expense of the structural, historical, or theoretical, according to their critics) (Orr 1997, 32). And while some have acknowledged the struggles and achievements of previous generations of feminists, third-wavers, by and large, have endeavored to distinguish themselves from their predecessors. “[A] break with the past is a major and consistent theme in...third wave discourse,” Catherine Orr points out in an issue of *Hypatia* devoted to third-wave feminism (ibid., 33). “[E]ven feminist history is heaped onto the reviled pile [of] ‘master narratives’” (ibid.). In sum, rebellion—against not only patriarchy, but second-wave feminism—and irreverence are often key characteristics of third-wave feminism.

With its solipsistic focus, unceremonious (some might say anti-intellectual) tone, and disavowal of second-wave feminism, third-wave feminism has been decried as pseudo-, anti-, or postfeminist. Insofar as chick lit offers fallible, self-absorbed heroines, some of whom fret just as much about their sexual objectification as they do about losing enough weight to fit into a snug dress, it is not always clear if its works are pseudo-, anti-, or postfeminist, or if they are articulating a new brand of feminism that recognizes duality, contradiction, and inconsistency. My point here is not to provide hard and fast definitions of postfeminism and third-wave feminism or to declare one sort of feminism superior to another. Instead, I wish to draw attention to feminism's blurry and contested boundaries. I have found these ambiguities useful in charting and, at the same time, questioning the shift from "Chicano" to "Latina" in and beyond academia. It is to *latinidad* that we now turn.

Dirty Girls and Latinidad

The Dirty Girls Social Club and Dirty Girls on Top are about a group of six close friends, all Latina. The self-proclaimed "*sucias*" (dirty girls) first met as undergraduates at Boston University, ten years before the narrative begins. At just over three-hundred pages each, neither novel has a clear plot, but both open with the friends getting together after an extended period of separation and close with a joyous reunion in an idyllic Caribbean setting. Furthermore, each offers an assortment of bad guys, including an ex-frat-boy boss, an insecure, jealous, and competitive boyfriend, a manhating lesbian who neglects her adopted son, a few greedy businessmen, and a handful of duplicitous lovers.

Both novels climax with violent outbursts from their villain par excellence, Roberto, the *sucia* Sara's estranged and dangerously erratic husband.

Above all, The Dirty Girls Social Club and Dirty Girls on Top are about their primary characters' struggles and aspirations. These novels follow the *sucias*' careers, romantic trysts, marriages, families, and relationships with themselves and one another. One character battles alcoholism and a potentially deadly eating disorder. Another finds her faithful, stay-at-home husband dull and unmanly, while another is nearly murdered by her unfaithful, macho, and irresistibly sexy husband. Another struggles to remain true to her artistic vision and, at the same time, to find commercial success. One *sucia* is secretly in love with another. And yet another longs painfully to become a mother.

Both novels are written in the first person and each chapter offers an individual character's perspective. Lauren Fernandez, a journalist with her own award-winning weekly newspaper column, opens The Dirty Girls Social Club and introduces the reader to herself and her friends by providing their biographical sketches. Among other things, we learn where each character comes from originally, about her educational background, occupation, and marital status, what kind of car she drives, her preferred brand of clothing, and her dress size.

In addition, Lauren provides us with details concerning language, class, and race, particularly complexion and physiognomy. For example, she describes herself as "half white trash," half "New Jersey Cuban" (Valdes-Rodriguez 2003, 6). Pale and monolingual-English, she struggles to master Spanish and confesses that she is "not a good Latina," even though she believes she is the token one at the newspaper that employs her (ibid., 5). Usnavys Rivera, a top executive at a national non-profit, is a

sassy, black Puerto Rican-Dominican who catapulted herself from Boston's housing projects to graduate school at Harvard. With a penchant for bling, she longs for a more glamorous life than the one offered by her loyal, long-time beau Juan. Rebecca Baca, the founder and owner of Ella, "the most popular Hispanic woman's magazine on the national market," is a prim and hardworking Hispana from rural northern New Mexico who, despite her "straight black hair," "brown skin," and "nose that looks like it came out of an RC Gorman painting," "insists on being called Spanish" (ibid., 21-22). She and her parents have a falling out after she and her husband Brad, a W. A. S .P. from Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, split up and she marries André, a wealthy black Briton. Sara Behar-Asís, a stay-at-home wife and mother in The Dirty Girls Social Club and hostess of Casas Americanas, a televised cooking show, in Dirty Girls on Top, is a "naturally blond" Cuban Jew from Miami with an eye for style (ibid., 26). However, her near-perfect appearance and elegant Brookline mansion belie an unhappy marriage marred by violence and infidelity. "Coffee-skinned" Amber Quintanilla, a gifted *rock en Español* singer and guitarist, is a *pocha* (Americanized Mexican) who hails originally from suburban Southern California (ibid., 27). On her quest to uncover her indigenous Mexican roots and land a recording contract, she reinvents herself as Cuicatl, "a name that means 'song' or 'sing'" in an indigenous Mexican language (presumably Nahuatl) (ibid., 129). And Elizabeth Cruz, a television news anchor in the first novel and the producer of Casas Americanas in the sequel, is a "black Latina. Black as in African" (ibid., 32). The Colombian immigrant is also a born-again Christian, lesbian, and Beyoncé Knowles lookalike. When the friends reunite over dinner in the first chapter of The Dirty Girls Social Club, Lauren proudly observes, "So here we are. The *sucias* of

Boston University, gorgeous and brilliant, talented and crazy, every color of the rainbow, a few different religions. We hug, we gossip, in Spanish, English, and every conceivable mix of the two” (ibid., 33). Clearly, each primary character represents a particular type, if not stereotype, of Latina, from white to black, native-born to immigrant, housewife to rocker, heterosexual to gay, Christian to Jew, and even skinny to fat.

“Latina” is a complicated label, one that does not refer to a “homogeneous ethnicity” or single race, but takes on and produces meaning within the narrow, yet malleable idiom of U. S. racial and ethnic politics (Flores and Yudice 1990, 57). This umbrella term links a “very heterogeneous medley of races, classes and nationalities,” including “native-born U. S. citizens...and Latin American immigrants of all racial and national combinations: white...Native American, black, Arabic, and Asian” (ibid.). Tracing its origins to “grassroots sectors of the population,” Suzanne Oboler observes that it was “coined as a progressive alternative to the state-imposed bureaucratic label Hispanic,” which government agencies began to use in the early 1970s (Oboler 1995, vii-viii). Where “Hispanic” looks to Europe (namely, Spain) for its referent, “Latina” emphasizes Latin America, hence its association with “new(er) hemispheric movements and forms of community as well as new(er) understandings of geography, ethnicity, history, class, race, gender, sexuality, culture...the economy, and social alliance” (Chabram-Dernersesian 2003, 105). Self-conscious, inorganic, and broad-based, it has been described as a “composite construct” (Dávila 1999, 184), “site of social identification” (Chabram-Dernersesian 2003, 105), and “commitment...to an exploration of conditions” that both encourage and inhibit “panethnic collectivity” (Caminero-Santangelo 2007, 218). By producing what it names, the label can forge fruitful alliances

across differences and enact coalition. At the same time, it “reorganize[s] social subjects around seemingly transparent racial, linguistic, ethnic, political, or geopolitical unities or blocs” (Chabram-Dernesian 2003, 106). Like “Hispanic,” “Latino” is dangerously tidy: it “veil[s] distinctions” and, thus, makes for a simplified and “far more consumable identity construct” (Dávila 2005, 154).

With its seemingly heterogeneous cast of Latina characters, the Dirty Girls novels appear to offer a smorgasbord of *latinidades*. In its most general sense, *latinidad* simply means “Latino-ness.” However, the anthropologist Arlene Dávila offers a richer, more complex definition: *latinidad* is “the process through which ‘Latinos’ or ‘Hispanics’ are conceived and represented as sharing one common identity” (Dávila 2001, 16). A singular Latina identity is not immediately apparent in the Dirty Girls series. Frankly, it is difficult to see what the protagonists have in common with one another. At times, I found myself wondering why they associated with each other in the first place, given their very different backgrounds, lifestyles, tastes, and politics. Yet, despite their differences, the novels’ primary characters share quite a bit in common: all are attractive, under the age of 35, educated, career-oriented (and ultimately very successful and very rich), Anglophone, and American. Most importantly, all are Latina.

Neither The Dirty Girls Social Club nor Dirty Girls on Top defines “Latina” according to a single national origin, region, race, religion, sexuality, language, or class—however, English is always their protagonists’ dominant language, no one frets about overstaying a visa, and, even if they have humble origins or run into financial problems, all end up rich. Moreover, these novels define “Latina” according to individual struggles and aspirations, like the quest for true love, inner peace, a rewarding career, and in some

cases, reconciliation with an estranged friend or family member. By and large, their heroines share these goals in common.

So what, if anything, distinguishes the *sucias* from Ally McBeal, Bridget Jones, or any other chick-lit protagonist? First and foremost, they are Latina and they enact and signify their *latinidad* in a variety of ways—for example, via their use of Spanish (however limited and infrequent); their occupations, nearly all of which may be described as *x* with a Latina twist (Sara, for instance, emerges as the Latina Martha Stewart in Dirty Girls on Top); and their names, such as Fernandez, Cuicatl, and Usnavys.¹³ And while they are mainstream and cosmopolitan enough to listen to Toni Braxton and Béla Bartók and to eat Chinese take-out and grilled elk brochettes, the *sucias* demonstrate their essential and enduring Latina-ness by dancing to *cumbia* and feasting on *ropa vieja*. As Dávila puts it, they “hav[e] signs of their...culture” (Dávila 1999, 183). These tropicalizing signs render their Latina-ness intelligible to the reader.¹⁴ They also define *latinidad* not in terms of a single language or common history, social space, or political vision, but as a lifestyle and product. When reduced to “reformulations of cultural icons,” such as “food and clothing, language, and popular music,” *latinidad* is more easily commodified and consumed (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997, 3).

Consuming Difference, Selling Sameness, and Seeking the Truth

The commercial success of Valdes-Rodriguez’s *chica lit* has been upheld as evidence of “the burgeoning Hispanic market” (Weaver 2003). “Having struck gold in the black market” with Waiting to Exhale, publishers are now “anxious” to mine the ever-expanding Latino market (ibid.). Demographic figures, it seems, have the potential to

translate into dollars. Yet, who exactly is snapping up copies of Valdes-Rodriguez's novels and why are they doing so?

For many readers, especially non-Latinas, The Dirty Girls Social Club is more than mere fiction; it is, in the words of one fan, "a wonderful insiders [sic.] guide."¹⁵ According to a review in the San Jose Mercury News, this novel "has much to tell us about what it's like to be a woman of color in this society" (Villagrán 2003, 18E). And Valdes-Rodriguez is more than a storyteller; she is also a travel guide and translator. In other words, she is a native informant. As one reviewer gushes, the author is "a lot more entertaining than any anthropology professor you've ever met" (Pearlman 2003). Another one notes that she is "the daughter of a sociologist" and praises her for "adopt[ing] a sociological stance in her literary approach."¹⁶ And more than one reader avows online to have "learned so much from [her books] about latina [sic.] women."¹⁷

Not surprisingly, online customer reviews attributed to Latinas affirm the veracity and authenticity of Valdes-Rodriguez's fiction. Many of these readers claim to identify with her characters and to recognize the situations in which they find themselves. One especially enthusiastic fan (who identifies so strongly with Valdes-Rodriguez's characters that she even calls herself "Sucia") insists, "If you're a Latina woman you will love [The Dirty Girls Social Club]. You will find yourself somehow relating to one of the characters."¹⁸ At the same time, positive reviews of the Dirty Girls series from readers who do not identify as Latina abound online. For instance, a male fan writes, "Hispanic or not, male or female, readers will find something to relate to by hanging out with the sucias all over again."¹⁹ Similarly, a self-described "avid reader" professes,

“[E]ven if you are not Latina, [The Dirty Girls Social Club] deals with the universal language of friendship and the ties that bond.”²⁰

Comments posted at websites that not only offer book reviews, but sell books, too, like Amazon.com and Barnesandnoble.com, reveal more about the marketing of Valdes-Rodriguez’s novels than they do about their reception. By highlighting the appeal—particular and universal alike—of Valdes-Rodriguez’s work, these positive reviews target both Latinas and non-Latinas as customers. In addition, they underscore minority literature’s perceived realism and authenticity, its putative connection to truth and reality, particularly real social problems.²¹ They also point to a major discrepancy between chick lit, a genre stemming from romantic fiction and fantasy, and *chica* lit, a genre linked to a particular racial-ethnic minority and, by extension, to realism.

Latinization

Even though presses as different as Third Woman, Random House, and Encanto Romances have published fiction by Latinas for decades, St. Martin’s, the publisher of Valdes-Rodriguez’s *chica* lit, credits itself with being the first to pay attention to “[a] brand new, large and eager audience”—“young American women whose Hispanic side had been overlooked by commercial novels until The Dirty Girls Social Club.”²² Yet, where small, progressive presses like Third Woman, South End, and Arte Público have published works by self-professed Chicana writers, such as Denise Chávez and Cherríe Moraga, Valdes-Rodriguez’s novels have been marketed as “Hispanic” and, to a greater extent, “Latina,” rather than as, say, “Chicana” or “Cuban American.” In fact, The Dirty Girls Social Club may well be the first English-language “Latina” novel.

That said, Valdes-Rodriguez has a conflicted relationship to the label “Latina.” On the one hand, she has offered bold and incisive observations regarding this label at her blog.²³ She has also provided detailed descriptions of her family tree at her official website, where we learn about her father, a Cuban immigrant, and about her mother, “a seventh-generation New Mexican of Irish, Native American, French Jew, English and Spanish extraction”²⁴ On the other hand, she has been cagey when discussing her own race or ethnicity in public. “There’s a part of me that wants to vomit to be called a Latina writer,” she states in one interview (Uhland 2003). Instead of having the label “Latina” imposed upon her, she says that she prefers to call herself a “citizen of the world,” “student of our global humanity,” or simply “human.”²⁵

Like many other minority writers and artists, it appears that Valdes-Rodriguez wants to be known more for her craft, rather than for her race or ethnicity. In a review titled “Dirty Girls’: Author Balks at ‘Latina’ Writer Label,” she laments, “Only in America am I referred to as a Latina writer...Overseas, I am called an American writer...I’m happy with whatever people call me, as long as ‘writer’ is somewhere in there” (Weaver 2003). Nonetheless, she has been branded “Latina” and, as the “Latina Terry McMillan” and “Godmother of Chica Lit,” she has not only been limited by this label; she has profited from it as well. She has not been linked to a specific national origin or ethnic subgroup—for example, Cuban Americans or Mexican Americans, despite her connections to both. In contrast, Denise Chávez, who is also New Mexican, and Cherríe Moraga, another mixed-race writer, proudly call themselves and are called Chicana.²⁶

So what does it mean to be a Latina writer, as opposed or in addition to a Chicana one in the early twenty-first century? Drawing from Dávila's study of the Latinization of the once Nuyorican Museo del Barrio in East Harlem, I contend that, just as "Latin American" has been embraced as a more global signifier than "Nuyorican" or "Puerto Rican," "Latino" is increasingly seen in the United States as more cosmopolitan and current than the supposedly provincial and anachronistic label "Chicana"—with cosmopolitanism referring to, in the historian David Hollinger's words, a stance that "favors voluntary affiliations," "promotes multiple identities," and "emphasizes the dynamic and changing character of groups" (Hollinger 1995, 3).²⁷ Despite its oppositional and progressive provenance, "Latino" has been deemed more universal and mainstream—in other words, less narrow and political—than "Chicana," a "politicized identity," to use the political theorist Wendy Brown's term, if ever there was one (Brown 2005, 54).

In its simplest definition, "Chicana" means an American of Mexican descent. However, this label also enunciates an oppositional stance vis-à-vis European and U. S. imperialisms and white supremacy and an outsider status vis-à-vis mainstream (namely, white, middle-class, Protestant) America. The word derives from *mexicana*, which comes from *mexica*, a term denoting a Nahuatl-speaking people from the Valley of Mexico (also known as the Aztecs), and forms the base of the modern word *México*. Before the 1960s, "Chicana" was a pejorative used mainly by Mexicans and Mexican Americans to refer to the poor, the Indian, and the *mestiza*. Like "black" and "queer," a new generation appropriated it and imbued it with new meaning. Where "Hispanic" was rejected for its Eurocentrism and "Mexican-American" for its assimilationist

connotations, “Chicana” was embraced and wielded as “a cipher repudiating the whiteness of experience” (Ybarra-Frausto 1991, 159).

As the title alone of Aída Hurtado’s Voicing Chicana Feminisms: Young Women Speak Out on Sexuality and Identity (2003) illustrates, the labels “Chicana” and “feminism” still resonate in the early twenty-first century, particularly for some *chicanitas*. But just as some women’s studies departments in American universities have reorganized themselves beneath the rubric of feminist and/or gender studies, some Chicano studies departments have reinvented themselves as and alongside Latino studies in recent years.²⁸ These changes in nomenclature are not merely superficial. Rather, they indicate that now more than ever, many Chicano studies scholars are not limiting their scope to Mexican America or to a particular region of the United States, in huge part because of the undeniable forces and effects of globalization, such as transnationalism, migration, and demographic changes (Oboler 2003).

Although “Chicana” and “Chicano” are “old-school” for some, this label has not been abandoned altogether (nor has it ever enjoyed much purchase in some places and among certain people—for example, northern New Mexico’s self-professed Hispanos).²⁹ Still, shifts within and beyond academia, especially in the art world, indicate that we may very well have arrived at a post-Chicano moment.³⁰ Along with Valdes-Rodriguez’s novels, works by a younger generation of mostly California-based writers, artists, and performers, such as Michele Serros (1993, 2006), Gustavo Arellano (2007), Eduardo López, Esteban Zul, and the video blogger and performance artist Ask a Chola, signal that “Chicana” and “Chicano” are increasingly associated with a particular generation, namely, baby boomers.³¹

Unlike their predecessors, these relatively young cultural workers are not so much angry and confrontational as they are humorous and ironic. Much of their work assumes, has been upheld as evidence of, and, to a certain extent, is emblematic of the mainstreaming, rather than marginalization, of Latinos and Latinas. For instance, a Los Angeles Times story about the now defunct website pocho.com reports that its creators, Eduardo López and Esteban Zul, “say they were inspired as boys by the 1970s Chicano movement, which demanded equal rights from an often hostile mainstream. *Pochismo* contends that, by now, Latinos in L. A. pretty much are the mainstream. If you’re too dim to get that, the *pochos* are ready to mock” (Hong 1999, B5). Indeed, these younger writers, artists, and performers are just as likely to mock racist and xenophobic politicians as they are the sacred cows of *chicanismo* and *chicanismo* itself.³²

This iconoclasm is also evident in the Dirty Girls series, which takes swipes at what twenty-eight-year-old Lauren describes as the “1970s Chicano movement, ‘brown and proud,’ West Coast *Que viva la raza* jive” (Valdes-Rodriguez 2003, 10). She and the other *sucias* do not take seriously Cuicatl’s active participation and credence in the Mexica Movement, a caricatured proxy for the student organization Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) and the Chicano movement more generally. Lauren dismisses the Mexica as humorless “Mexicans and Mexican-Americans who insist on being called Native Americans, and specifically Aztecs, instead of Hispanics or Latinos” (ibid., 25). And even though Cuicatl is always proud of her indigenous identity and remains a vociferous critic of European and U. S. imperialisms, a faction of the Mexica reject her once she achieves stardom by recording songs in her native English—in other words, once she finds acceptance and reward from the American mainstream.

Disenchanted with the Movement, she reports toward the end of The Dirty Girls Social Club, “The Mexica....supposedly don’t claim me anymore, now that I’ve been invited to perform at the MTV Awards” (ibid., 220).

In addition, Valdes-Rodriguez’s debut novel scorns Mexican and Mexican-American cultural icons, such as Frida Kahlo, Edward James Olmos, the figure of the pachuco, the slain Tejana singer Selena, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. When Lauren introduces herself and her friends in the first chapter, she announces, “[W]e *sucias* are all professionals. We’re not meek maids. Or cha-cha hookers. We’re not silent little women praying to the Virgin of Guadalupe with lace *mantillas* on our heads” (Valdes-Rodriguez 2003, 11). In fact, Valdes-Rodriguez’s main characters are different from many—perhaps most—protagonists in Chicana narratives, fiction and historiography alike, in that they are educated, professional, and wealthy. In The Dirty Girls Social Club, Lauren further distances herself and her well-heeled friends from “those downtrodden chicks in the novels of those old-school Chicana writers”—namely, fellow *nuevo mexicana* Denise Chávez, in the following vituperation:

...you know the ones; they wait tables and watch old Mexican movies in decrepit downtown theaters where whiskery drunks piss on the seats; they drive beat-up cars and clean toilets with their fingernails coated in Ajax; their Wal-Mart polyester pants smell like tamales and they always, *always* feel sad because some idiot in a plaid cowboy shirt is drunk again and singing José Alfredo Jiménez songs down at the local crumbling adobe cantina instead of coming home and fixing the broken lightbulb that swings on the naked wire and making passionate *amor*...like a real *hombre* (ibid.).³³

Just as some third wave feminists “are positioned—and position themselves—as...rebellious daughters who refuse to conform to the rule book of their second wave mothers,” Valdes-Rodriguez has actively endeavored to distinguish her work from that of a previous generation of Chicana writers (Gillis and Munford 2004, 176.). In one interview, she states that in writing her debut novel, “I wrote the book I had wanted to read for years” (Weaver 2004). The Generation-X, U. S.-born, Ivy-educated, native-speaker of English, and professor’s daughter adds, “Many of the established Latino writers—Sandra Cisneros, Gabriel García Márquez—spoke more to my grandparents’ and parents’ generation than to mine. They wrote about the immigrant experience. I wanted to write a book about people like me and my friends” (ibid.).³⁴

Despite her relatively privileged upbringing and elite education, Valdes-Rodriguez was by no means as affluent, glamorous, or successful as her characters prior to publishing her first novel.³⁵ Still, her remark about wanting to write a book about people like herself and her friends, along with the many positive reviews of her novels, point to an expectation and perceived function of minority writers and minority literature: they are to produce work that serves as an identificatory locus for minority readers insofar as their stories are supposed to interpellate us and to reflect with accuracy our experiences as they compensate for our lack of representation and/or as they correct our misrepresentation in the dominant media. As such, minority writers are also held responsible for educating the majority and rectifying misperceptions of us, even if they write in a genre with only a tenuous connection to realism or reality.

The Dirty Girls series corrects hackneyed misrepresentations and misperceptions of Latinas by foregrounding the *sucias*’ diversity, success, cosmopolitanism, and

assimilation. Undeniably, Lauren, Navi, Rebecca, Sarita, Cuicatl, and Liz, like other chick-lit protagonists, make some very foolish choices and sometimes engage in self-destructive behavior; there would be no plot if they did not do so. But in the end, they triumph by coming together. With support from one another, they confront and overcome their problems and realize their dreams, however modified. Ultimately, each emerges as a fit—and, here, I will venture to add—liberal feminist role model for other women, particularly Latinas. True, the *sucias* are by no means radical feminists. At the end of both novels, nearly all, heterosexual and lesbian alike, have settled into normative, albeit not necessarily traditional, relationships. Still, the Dirty Girls series, unlike some of chick lit's most popular titles, valorizes women's independence and solidarity, along with their professional success. Its heroines are not as solitary, pathetic, or ludicrous as Bridget Jones or Ally McBeal, neither of whom has been upheld as a metonym for all English women or all white American women respectively. The *sucias*, while imperfect, offer positive representations of Latinas. Far from threatening or subversive, they are model minorities.

Immigrants and the Post-racial Regime

Valdes-Rodriguez's upwardly mobile heroines exemplify the American dream. Their realization of this dream is most evident in their affluence and assimilation. The *sucias* dine at Boston's most chic restaurants, treat themselves to body wraps and pedicures, vacation at luxury resorts in New Mexico and Jamaica, own homes in exclusive neighborhoods, send their children to the best private schools, and surround themselves with expensive brand names, like "Tiffany, Manolo Blahnik, Bobbi Brown, Jimmy Choo,

Carolina Herrera [and] Fendi” (Villagrán 2003, 19E). If they are not rich, they will be by the time the novel closes or in the next one.

Like chick lit in general, Valdes-Rodriguez’s novels celebrate wealth and consumption as an individual good. Yet, as *chica* lit, they celebrate them as a *greater* good as well. For example, after boasting about her and the other *sucias*’ professional accomplishments, Lauren declares, “The chicks be here,” with “here” presumably referring to the ruling class (Valdes-Rodriguez 2003, 12.). Undeniably, The Dirty Girls Social Club and Dirty Girls on Top have something new to offer by portraying Latinas as educated, professional, prosperous, and powerful. Yet, the fact that only twelve percent of Latinas in the United States has a Bachelor’s degree and a tiny minority earns over “the fabled six-figure mark” should serve as a reminder that these novels are not insider’s guides or academic studies and are complicated by a generous dose of fiction and fantasy—chick lit, in other words (ibid., 8).³⁶

Originality and irreverence notwithstanding, Valdes-Rodriguez’s novels, like so many other narratives in and about the United States, fuse wealth and Americanization. The *sucias*’ assimilation is visible not only in their consumption habits—particularly, their fondness for luxury goods and services, their eclectic musical tastes, and the myriad foods they eat—but also, and most obviously, in their use of English. Except for a smattering of Spanish words and phrases, such as “*m’ija*” and “*Dios mío*” (additional signs of the characters’ *latinidad*), the Dirty Girls novels are entirely in English, dialogue included. Even the characters for whom Spanish is their first language, like Usnavys, Sara, and Elizabeth, the sole immigrant in the group, speak to one another in English.³⁷ While the Dirty Girls series stresses Latinas’ racial, regional, religious, and sexual

diversity, it ignores linguistic differences. In doing so, it fails to acknowledge the multifarious connections among race, language, and immigration (namely, the racialization of language and immigrants).

Immigrants are conspicuously absent in both novels. With the exception of Elizabeth, the least developed protagonist, they appear only as minor characters. To be fair, Valdes-Rodriguez has stated that she did not set out to write about “the immigrant experience” with her debut novel, as I note above. By and large, her writing—books and blog alike—challenges stereotypes of Latinas and Latinos by stressing the fact some are not immigrants and many “do not speak Spanish well,” if at all “after the second generation.”³⁸ Many of her observations and representations make an important intervention in discussions of both *latinidad* and American-ness. Indeed, they claim American-ness for Latinas, who, all too often, are dismissed wholesale as foreign and, therefore, as undeserving of the rights and privileges of “real” Americans, including the right to be in the United States. Yet, they do so by distinguishing Latinas from immigrants.

Valdes-Rodriguez’s novels are extraordinary because they distance *latinidad* from “the immigrant experience,” a staple of many Chicana and Latino narratives. In the words of her fans, they “defy clichés” (Smith 2003, E4) and are “utterly fresh.”³⁹ As Time magazine’s Miranda observes, the *sucias* are unique because they are “smart, funny and, most important, professionals, none of whom ever gets absorbed in ponderous debates about the immigrant experience” (Miranda 2005). Yet, as they separate *latinidad* from immigration, they articulate the former with and as a normative American-ness, as represented by money and the English language. Ironically, given the praise heaped on to

Valdes-Rodriguez's novels for their originality, this vision of American-ness is neither rare nor radical.

By celebrating wealth and consumption (by Latinas and of *latinidad*) and emphasizing English, Valdes-Rodriguez's *chica lit* upholds the politics of the status quo—namely, capitalism, multiculturalism, and the hegemony of the English language.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, critics have lauded her novels because they eschew “didacticism” and, quoting Miranda once again, “ponderous debates”—politics, in other words.⁴¹ With their happy endings, the *Dirty Girls* series portrays Latinas as *apolitical*, as safely, successfully, and enviably normative. Even Cuicatl, the most hyperbolically political of the *sucias*, is ultimately embraced by the American mainstream. As a proud, self-professed “Xicana,” she vows to write songs that “speak for the twenty-three million of my people who were slaughtered by the Spaniards” (Valdes-Rodriguez 2003, 221). As a feminist, she reminds herself after her boyfriend dumps her that she needs “the strength to stand alone. It was men who sold women in the Aztec past, wasn't it?” (ibid.). As a rock star, she gets breast implants and serves as a guest judge on *American Idol*.

In their effort to present something new, the *Dirty Girls* novels, like third-wave feminism, highlight contradiction and complicity. They also renounce a particular sort of politics, as represented by second-wave feminism, *chicanismo*, and Chicana/o and Latina/o histories of unrest and activism more generally. They disavow not only the past—namely, social movements of the 1960s and 1970s—but the immigrant present and future as well.

By ignoring the subject of immigration, these novels also shed light on shifting racial formations in the putatively post-racial United States. “Post-race” or “post-racial”

generally refers to a stance or state without race, racial difference, or racial conflict, as represented by the black-white divide in particular. This position or condition “transcends race”—that is, it moves beyond it (Boyer 2008, 38). For some, the post-racial, as exemplified most pointedly by the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama, promises not only the end of race, but of racism as well. It heralds an end to internecine and confining partisanship and the beginning of a liberating ecumenicalism. As one cultural commentator has observed, “Obama’s candidacy signified...the idea that black politics might now be disappearing into American politics in the same way that the Irish and Italian machines long ago joined the political mainstream” (Bai 2008).

In contrast, others have averred that notions of the post-racial often hinge on racial difference, even as they erase it. Distinguishing “post-racist” from “post-racial,” the sociologist Michael Eric Dyson elaborates, “a post-racist outlook seeks to delete oppression that rests on hate and fear, that exploits cultural and political vulnerability,” where a post-racial one “seeks to delete crucial strands of our identity” (Dyson 2008). In other words, the post-racial functions much like assimilation in that it expunges difference and particularity in exchange for universalism and absorption into the mainstream without necessarily addressing the inequalities that stem from racism’s past. As the history of immigration to the United States attests, assimilation is possible for some, for those for whom difference and particularity can be deleted. For others, assimilation is incomplete or impossible.

Discussions of the post-racial have, for the most part, focused on African Americans, especially male African-American politicians. (Curiously, white politicians and black prison inmates are rarely, if ever, characterized as post-racial.⁴²) Latinas and

Latinos are generally not included in these discussions, even though this population has seen rapid growth in the United States over the past several decades, in great part because of immigration. Yet, Latina/o immigration plays an important role in the putatively post-racial regime. While this regime promises to absorb some messianic African-American politicians into the mainstream as “Americans” (with Obama as a “re-founding father,” in Dyson’s words [Dyson 2008]), some Latina and Latino immigrants remain perennial outsiders as illegal aliens or as a people deemed unable or unwilling to assimilate (Huntington 1996, 205-206, Huntington 2004a, Huntington 2005b).

In order for this race-obsessed country to be post-racial, alterity must be reconfigured. This does not mean that blackness ceases to signify difference or that African Americans are removed from the American racial hierarchy. However, another racial formation, framed by nation and citizenship, has emerged against the backdrop of the resurgent nativism and xenophobia of the 1990s and early twenty-first century, a period marked by the “browning of America” (the result of escalating immigration from Latin America) (Rivera 2005); the passage of reactionary propositions attacking immigrants and bilingual education; the increased militarization of the U. S.-Mexico border; and a crackdown on immigrants—documented and undocumented alike—especially as suspected terrorists. In the wake of 9/11, Arabs, Muslims, or anyone resembling them—ambiguous brown people, for lack of a better term—have become dangerous aliens (Puar and Rai 2002, Volpp 2003). In this context, African-American-ness can be recentered as American, however qualified or subordinated (Carbado 2005, Dudziak and Volpp 2006). And while racism against blacks endures, it merges with

nativism so that Islam and brownness, particularly accented brownness, are equated with foreignness, un-American-ness, or *anti-American-ness*.⁴³

By rejecting unsubtle, overtly political, and exotic—namely, Chicana and immigrant—identities of the past, present, and future, Valdes-Rodriguez’s novels distinguish Latinas from undesirable outsiders, or any outsiders at all for that matter. Rich and American, the *sucias* assure readers of the new Gilded Age that Latinas are far from atypical and abnormal. Unlike their predecessors in Chicana feminist literature or the real immigrants who took to the streets of American cities in the spring of 2006, they are not agitators or aliens. And if they are victims of capitalism, white supremacy, imperialism, patriarchy, homophobia, or biology, they use money to compensate for their injuries and to solve their personal problems: they defy snooty realtors and buy houses in upscale neighborhoods; they sell more magazines or albums than their competitors or critics estimated; they have a fling with or marry someone who is both attractive and rich; they hire a surrogate mother to have their baby; they undergo liposuction and receive Botox treatments; or they simply leave the country for a while to find themselves. These *chicas* merely want and deserve the same things many other hardworking, post-second-wave, American women of the neoliberal era desire: a rewarding career, a faithful and beautiful lover (who pleases in bed and changes a diaper equally well), a stylish wardrobe, and a flat *panza*.

In the Dirty Girls series, “Latina” is simultaneously universal and particular, everything and nothing. Valdes-Rodriguez has claimed that her “mission” in writing her debut novel was “to prove that the (Latino) category does not exist” (Weaver 2004). Yet, rather than erase this category, her novels redefine it. However, they do so by severing

latinidad from a politicized identity or position, the Spanish language, and the outsider—specifically, the immigrant, thereby rendering it familiar, innocuous, and amusing. Fans and purveyors find Valdes-Rodriguez’s *chica lit* palatable and profitable because it simultaneously appeals to a very specific demographic and to “women of all ethnicities.”⁴⁴ In short, her novels offer difference, homology, particularity, and universalism at once. Their heroines are not “that different from Bridget Jones herself,” but distinctive enough to interpellate, entertain, educate, and sell.⁴⁵

The 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century saw increased visibility of Latinas and Latinos in the American marketplace and American politics. However, as Dávila cautions, purchasing power should not be mistaken for political power. That is, being a consumer is not the same as being a full citizen. “Latinas are undoubtedly gaining visibility,” she points out, “but only as a market and markets must remain docile. They cannot afford to scare capital away” (Dávila 2001, 238). Even as Latina and Latino celebrities, like Jennifer Lopez, Ricky Martin, and Shakira, have become household names; as Latina and Latino politicians, such as Antonio Villaraigosa, Loretta Sanchez, and Bill Richardson, have assumed (or fallen from) positions of national and international prominence; and even as salsa beats out ketchup as the nation’s favorite condiment, Latina and Latino immigrants—especially poor undocumented immigrants upon whose cheap labor much of the economy revolves, yet who are forced to live clandestine lives—remain outside the polis and social contract.

Conclusion: Post-Chicano

The Dirty Girls Social Club and Dirty Girls on Top have emerged at a moment of “posts” in which feminism, race, and identity politics are supposed to be things of the past. However, the novels’ content and marketing reveal that difference still matters, but only if it can be contained and sold to as many people as possible. These novels are full of contradictions: they simultaneously exploit and deflect difference and are both original and hackneyed. Additionally, they point to the dual nature of fantasy as liberating and conservative; to the promises and limitations of the identity-based social movements of the last century—particularly second-wave feminism and *chicanismo*; and to the ease with which these struggles and their goals can be appropriated and repackaged for a new generation of eager consumers.

I am one of those consumers. A highly educated, middle-class, Gen-X, feminist, Latina/Chicana/Mexican American/Hispanic/*pocha*, I am drawn to Valdes-Rodriguez’s writing because—with all due respect to Cisneros and María Helena Viramontes (1996)—I sometimes seek representations of Chicanas, Latinas, and *latinidad* beyond *Mango Street* or *los pies de Jesus*. Valdes-Rodriguez’s work attracts me because, for better and for worse, I, like many of her fans, see a bit of myself in it. Finally, I am drawn to it because of the contradictions it presents. To be frank, I have a vexed relationship to her chica lit. Some of it makes laugh, some of it makes me cringe, and some of it prompts me to reflect on real social structures and relationships and struggles for social change.

While I do not treat Valdes-Rodriguez’s fiction as a sociological treatise, I maintain that it sheds light on the moment of its production. In other words, it has

something to say about the meanings, values, means, products, persistence, and/or end of (post)feminism and (post-)chicanismo in the early twenty-first century. If “posting,” as Hollinger points out, can refer to a “repudiation of a previous episode” or a “building upon it and critically refining its contributions,” then Valdes-Rodriguez’s chica lit is post-feminist and post-Chicano (Hollinger 1995, 5). Without abandoning feminism or the aims of the Chicano movement altogether, it underscores a generational rift between feminists and between Chicanas and Latinas, as well as a growing divide between U. S.-born Latinas and immigrants from Latin America. Ironically, just as postfeminism, third-wave feminism, and chick lit are predicated on second-wave feminism, her novels could not exist without previous and ongoing social struggles. For example, if not for second-wave feminists’ and Chicanas’ demands for access to higher education and integration and promotion in the workplace, which saw fruition (however, limited) via affirmative action, there would be fewer, if any, Latina reporters, publicists, magazine publishers, or entrepreneurs. In short, Valdes-Rodriguez’s characters would not exist, nor would chica lit, its creator, or this critic for that matter.

¹ Valdes-Rodriguez is both a prolific and versatile writer. Her *oeuvre* includes five chicalit novels (Valdes-Rodriguez 2003, Valdes-Rodriguez 2004, Valdes-Rodriguez 2006b, Valdes-Rodriguez 2008, Valdes-Rodriguez 2009), and the young-adult novel Haters (2006a). She also maintains a blog (<http://alisavaldes-rodriguezofficialblog.blogspot.com/>), in which she comments on a range of topics, from current events to her personal life. Regarding the film adaptation of The Dirty Girls Social Club, see the Internet Movie Data Base (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1123375/>)

(accessed May 14, 2009). “Break-out literary star” is from Entertainment Weekly (<http://alisavaldesrodriguez.com/alisavaldesrodriguez.htm>) (accessed March 22, 2006).

² Since the publication of The Dirty Girls Social Club, the field of chica lit has grown, in part because of Valdes-Rodriguez’s productivity and her efforts to mentor budding writers (for example, at chica-lit writing workshops she sponsors). For a sampling of chica-lit titles, see, Castillo (2005), Castillo (2006), Castillo (2007), Piñeiro, et al. (2005), Piñeiro (2006), Piñeiro (2007), Platas (2006), Rios (2006), Quintero (2006), and Zepeda (2009). What’s more, scholars have begun to turn their attention to chica lit, as evidenced by García (2005) and “Chica Lit and the Tradition of Chicana/Chicano Literature,” a panel devoted entirely to The Dirty Girls Social Club at the 2009 meeting of the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies.

³ Valdes-Rodriguez was born in 1969. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alisa_Valdes-Rodriguez (accessed July 14, 2009). In general, “Generation X” refers to a post-baby boom generational cohort, to Americans born in the early-to-mid 1960s through the late 1970s. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generation_X (accessed July 14, 2009).

⁴ I realize that my observations here are merely anecdotal. For more empirically-based conclusions that support them, see Telles and Ortiz (2008).

⁵ In defining chick lit, I draw from Baratz-Longsted (2006), Donadio (2006), Ferriss and Young (2006), Razdan (2004), Smith (2008), and Yardley (2007). Also see <http://chicklitbooks.com/whatis.php>.

⁶ In fact, chick lit has been credited with sustaining an “otherwise struggling fiction industry” (Razdan 2004). Moreover, its reach is global, with chick lit titles emerging in countries as varied as India, Poland, and Sweden (Donadio 2006), and it has spawned not

only chica lit, but other subgenres as well, such as chick lit jr. (chick lit for adolescents), mom lit (chick lit for mothers), and South Asian American chick lit (Skurnick 2006, Butler and Desai 2008). Sistah lit, African American chick lit, is not necessarily an offshoot of, but seed for chick lit if McMillan's Waiting to Exhale, which was published years before the novels I note here, is taken into account. Regarding sistah lit, see Guerrero (2006).

⁷ Even though, as Janice A. Radway points out in her groundbreaking study, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (1984), the romance makes “deliberate use of the conventions of the realistic novel,” romance reading functions as fantasy in that it is escapist (Radway 1984, 204). “Reading, in this sense, connotes a free space where [readers] feel liberated from the need to perform duties that they otherwise willingly accept as their own. At the same time, by carefully choosing stories that make them feel particularly happy, they escape figuratively into a fairy tale where a heroine’s similar needs are adequately met” (ibid., 93).

⁸ As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra note, “While it has been argued that aspects of postfeminism appeared in popular media as far back as the early 1980s, it was during the 1990s that the term became concretized, both as a discursive phenomenon and as a buzzword of U. S. and U. K. journalism” (Tasker and Negra 2007, 8). Likewise, Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon, and Ingrid Richter trace postfeminism to the 1990s: its emergence “was premised on the assumed fact that [the previous] two decades of social policy and legal reform, informed by social opportunities initiatives, had provided the foundations for measurable social change and institutional advancement. Comment in

the media, in politics and in industry became scattered with references to the 1990s as an ‘enlightened’ and ‘post-feminist’ period” (Coppock, Haydon, and Richter 1995, 3).

In defining postfeminism, I have drawn from the works I cite above, as well as from Aronson (2003), Arthurs (2003), Hall and Rodriguez (2003), McRobbie (2004), and Negra (2009).

⁹ Also see Ebeling (1990) and Sommers (1995).

¹⁰ Undeniably, women have long been hailed as consumers, yet luxury consumption (among women and men alike) was a salient characteristic of the so-called irrationally exuberant environment of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century. Regarding earlier generations of female consumers, see Enstad (1999), Peiss (1985), Peiss (1998), and Ruiz (1993).

¹¹ Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai explain, “As a political ideology, neoliberalism involves a reformulation of liberal individualism through notions of ‘choice’ and ‘consumer sovereignty’” (Butler and Desai 2008, 7). They collapse postfeminism with neoliberal feminism, for which “the notion of ‘having choices’ has come to stand in for feminine agency” (ibid.).

¹² Third-wave publications include magazines like Bust and Bitch (the latter of which is sold in mainstream, corporate spaces, such as Whole Foods Markets), as well as more alternative zines and blogs.

In defining third-wave feminism, I also draw from Bailey (1997), Baumgardner and Richards (2000), Dicker (2003), Garrison (2000), Gillis, Howie, and Munford (2007), Gillis and Munford (2004), Hall and Rodriguez (2003), Henry (2004a), Henry (2004b), Heywood and Drake (1997), Johnson (2006), Labaton and Martin (2004), Reger (2005),

Springer (2002), Walker (1995), and *Hypatia* 12, No. 3 (Summer 1997), an entire issue devoted to this subject.

¹³ Pronounced “Ooos-NAH-vees,” this name is the Hispanicization of “U. S. NAVY,” which Usnavys’ Puerto Rican mother took from the sides of the ships that would “come and go on their way to bombing the hell out of the island of Viequez” (Valdes-Rodriguez 2003, 13).

¹⁴ “To *tropicalize*... means to trope, to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values. These intersecting discourses are distributed among official texts, history, literature, and the media, thus circulating these ideological constructs throughout various levels of the receptor society” (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997, 8).

¹⁵ Online customer review by Stacie posted September 22, 2003.

<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbninquiry.asp?z=y&ean=9780312313821&displayonly=CRV&pwb=1&idx=0#CRV> (accessed May 3, 2006).

¹⁶ Online customer review by Ralph A. Leonart posted April 5, 2005.

<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbninquiry.asp?z=y&ean=9780312313821&displayonly=CRV&pwb=1&idx=0#CRV> (accessed May 3, 2006). Valdes-Rodriguez’s

father, Nelson Valdes, is a professor of sociology at Duke University. See Smith (2004), Villagrán (2003), and <http://alisavaldesrodriguez.com/alisavaldesrodriguez.htm> (accessed May 3, 2006).

¹⁷ Online customer review by Stacie posted September 22, 2003.

<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbninquiry.asp?z=y&ean=9780312313821&displayonly=CRV&pwb=1&idx=0#CRV> (accessed May 3, 2006). Also see the online

review by Barbara Gordon (<http://barbara-gordon.livejournal.com/20655.html>) (accessed January 28, 2008).

¹⁸ Online customer review by Sucia posted December 22, 2003.

<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbninquiry.asp?z=y&ean=9780312313821&displayonly=CRV&pwb=1&idx=0#CRV> (accessed May 3, 2006).

¹⁹ Online customer review by Johnny Diaz posted July 10, 2008.

http://www.amazon.com/Dirty-Girls-Top-Alisa-Valdes-Rodriguez/product-reviews/031234967X/ref=cm_cr_pr_link_2?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0&pageNumber=2&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending (accessed June 16, 2009).

²⁰ Online customer review by Yads posted June 17, 2003.

<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbninquiry.asp?z=y&ean=9780312313821&displayonly=CRV&pwb=1&idx=0#CRV> (accessed May 3, 2006).

²¹ Debates concerning urban fiction (also known as street lit, hip-hop lit, gangsta fiction, and ghetto fiction) underscore minority literature's perceived authenticity, realism, and responsibilities (to documenting the real and to a particular community—in this case, urban African Americans). For a brief, albeit lucid assessment of these debates, see Broyard (2009).

²² Online review of Playing with Boys from the publisher,

<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbnInquiry.asp?z=y&endeca=1&isbn=0641676735&utn=9> (accessed May 3, 2006).

²³ See, for example, “Obama and the Latino Vote in the NY Times” (January 16, 2008), in which Valdes-Rodriguez takes on the Times for pitting Latinos against blacks in its report that Latinos would not vote for Barack Obama during the 2008 U. S. presidential

campaign. She deftly argues that this “sloppy, inaccurate” reporting ignores “the vast diversity of Latino America”—namely, that many Latinos are in fact black and, therefore, “black” and “Latino” are not “mutually exclusive” categories.

<http://alisavaldesrodriguez.blogspot.com/2008/01/obama-and-latino-vote-in-ny-times.html> (accessed June 2, 2008).

²⁴ I accessed information about Valdes-Rodriguez’s ancestry at alisavaldesrodriguez.com on April 18, 2007 and February 3, 2008.

²⁵ “Citizen of the world” and “student of our global humanity” are from <http://www.alisavaldesrodriguez.com/alisavaldesrodriguez.htm> (accessed February 3, 2008). “Human” is from <http://www.alisavaldesrodriguez.com/qanda/htm> (accessed April 18, 2007).

²⁶ See Brown-Guillory (1999) and Moraga (1983).

²⁷ See Dávila (2005) and Dávila (1999). Hollinger contrasts “cosmopolitanism” with “pluralism,” which he asserts “respects inherited boundaries,” and protects and preserves ethno-racial groups (Hollinger 1995, 3).

²⁸ For example, the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies at Arizona State University recently changed its name to Transborder Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies. At my campus, the University of California, Santa Cruz, Latin American Studies reinvented itself as Latin American and Latino Studies in 1994 and Women’s Studies renamed itself Feminist Studies in 2007.

²⁹ I take the characterization of “Chicano” as “old-school” from a letter to the editor in the March-April 2006 issue of the now-defunct Los Angeles magazine Tu Ciudad.

³⁰ Regarding “post-Chicano” art, see, for example, González (1999), Kun (2005), and González, Fox, and Noriega (2008).

³¹ See <http://www.askachola.com/> (accessed February 5, 2008).

³² *Chicanismo* has multiple meanings. In its broadest sense, it means pride in being Chicana/o and is similar to the African-American concept of “race pride.” It may also refer more narrowly to Chicano cultural nationalism.

³³ This passage appears to invoke Chávez’s *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986) and *Loving Pedro Infante* (2001).

³⁴ After studying jazz saxophone at the Berklee College of Music, Valdes-Rodriguez enrolled in the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University (Smith 2003).

³⁵ Valdes-Rodriguez recalls that, after her very public and acrimonious resignation from the *Los Angeles Times* in 2001, she felt that she had “screwed up [her] life and had to crawl back to journalism” (Villagrán 2003, 4C). With her career in a shambles, she returned to her native New Mexico and gave birth to her son while on Medicaid. When her agent called her to tell her about the publishers’ bidding war over *The Dirty Girls Social Club*, the soon-to-be-famous author was wearing “Wal-Mart shoes and a Wal-Mart dress” (ibid.).

³⁶ According to the U. S. Census Bureau, twelve percent of “the Hispanic population age 25 and older” had a Bachelor’s degree or higher in 2004. Ten percent of college students in 2004 were Hispanic (http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/005338.html) (accessed July 1, 2009). “The median money income for Hispanic households” in 2003 was “about \$33,000, which was 69 percent the median for non-Hispanic white

households”

(http://factfinder.census.gov/jsp/saff/SAFFInfo.jsp?_pageId=tp6_income_employment)

(accessed July 1, 2009).

³⁷ St. Martin’s Press has published Spanish translations of all of Valdes-Rodriguez’s chica lit novels.

³⁸ <http://alisavaldesrodriguez.blogspot.com/2008/01/obama-and-latino-vote-in-ny-times.html> (accessed June 2, 2008).

³⁹ Online review of Playing with Boys from St. Martin’s Press (<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbnInquiry.asp?z=y&endeca=1&isbn=0641676735&itm=9>) (accessed May 3, 2006).

⁴⁰ Here, I define “multiculturalism” as a position advocating diversity, particularly racial and/or ethnic diversity. This position is inherently conservative in that it celebrates diversity for diversity’s sake, rather than seeking to interrogate, transform, or overturn the social structures, institutions, and relationships that produce difference.

⁴¹ “Didacticism” is from a blurb attributed to Library Journal on the first page of the 2006 paperback edition of Playing with Boys.

⁴² In a letter to The New Yorker responding to Peter J. Boyer’s “The Color of Politics” (2008), William Gipson astutely notes, “It is interesting when the idea of transcending race is put forth it always references African-Americans—making it an imprecise way of suggesting that in spite of the sad history of racism in this country some African-Americans are able, in rare situations, to mute the negative connotations that the larger society associates with blackness” (Gipson 2008).

⁴³ In addition to the publications I cite here, my argument builds upon works by De Genova and Ramos-Zayas (2003), De Genova (2006), and Galindo and Vigil (2006).

⁴⁴ Blurb from The Romantic Times in the 2006 paperback edition of Playing with Boys.

⁴⁵ Blurb from the Miami Herald in the 2006 paperback edition of Playing with Boys.