A Sociology of the Chick Lit of Anita Heiss

By Fiannuala Morgan

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School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne
Abstract

Wiradjuri woman, Anita Heiss, is arguably one of the first Australian authors of popular fiction. Since 2007, she has published across a diversity of genres including chick lit, contemporary women’s fiction, romance, memoir and children’s literature. A focus on the political characterises her work; and her identity as an author is both supplemented and complemented by her roles as an academic, activist and public intellectual. Heiss has discussed genre as a means of targeting specific audiences that may be less engaged with Indigenous affairs, and positions her novels as educative but not didactic. There remains, however, some ambivalence about the significance of the role that genre plays in her literature as well as for the diverse and differentiated audience that she attracts. The aims of this thesis then are two-fold: firstly, to present a complication of academic conceptions of genre, then to use this discussion to explore the social significance of Heiss’ literature.

My focus is Heiss’ first four chick lit novels: *Not Meeting Mr Right* (2007), *Avoiding Mr Right* (2008), *Manhattan Dreaming* (2010) and *Paris Dreaming* (2011). Scholarship in the field leans toward an understanding that the racial politics of non-white articulations of the chick lit genre are invariably incompatible with the basic formula of chick lit texts. My thesis proposes a methodological shift from the dominant mode of ideological analysis to one that is largely focused on reader response. This approach is influenced by Bourdieu’s sociological approach to literature and adapts his multi-tiered analysis to account for the author, the text and the reader. Still implicit in academic writing on chick lit is an argument for formula as constitutive of the genre, this thesis negates this position and follows John Frow’s (2006) understanding of genre as an interpretive frame. This holistic approach allows for a complication of pessimistic readings that reproduce racially thematised chick lit as deviant or politically problematic.

I pursue the question of how Heiss’ writing functions in the public sphere, as well as undertaking broader enquiry into the significance of genre for both author and reader. Heiss’ readership is constituted by committed readers of romance and chick lit as well as politically engaged readers that are attracted to Heiss’ dual authorial persona; and, both groups bring radically distinct expectations to bear on these texts. Through analysis of online reviews and surveys conducted with users of the book reviewing website Goodreads, I complicate the understanding of genre as a cogent interpretative frame, and deploy this discussion to explore the social significance of Heiss’ literature.
Declaration

I, Fiannuala Morgan, declare that this thesis is my original work towards the total completion of Master of Arts (Thesis only). This thesis comprises only my original work. Due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used. This thesis is 33,400 words in length excluding the bibliography and appendix.

Signed:

Fiannuala Morgan

September 7, 2018
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Introduction

The focus of this thesis is Anita Heiss’ four chick lit novels: Not Meeting Mr Right (2007), Avoiding Mr Right (2008), Manhattan Dreaming (2010) and Paris Dreaming (2011). These are, arguably, the first popular fiction novels published by an Aboriginal Australian author.¹ Each of these texts follows a different Aboriginal female protagonist in pursuit of love, career and general fun. In Not Meeting Mr Right, Alice Aigner — Head of History at a Sydney Catholic school — undertakes an exhaustive search for Mr Right, determined to be wed by her 30th birthday. In Avoiding Mr Right, Peta Tully — Department Manager of Media, Sports, Arts, Refugees and Indigenous Affairs — relocates from Sydney to Melbourne to pursue her career aspiration of one day becoming Minister of Cultural Affairs. Along the way she escapes a stifling relationship and finds love with an unconventional character — a policeman! In Manhattan Dreaming, Lauren — an up-and-coming curator at the National Aboriginal Gallery of Canberra — undertakes a fellowship at the National Museum of American Indians in New York City in flight from an unhealthy relationship with a Canberra based footballer. And, in Paris Dreaming Lauren’s colleague Libby, the program manager at the National Aboriginal Gallery, undertakes a fellowship at Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. Although declared to be on a “man fast” (2) and a “realist” not a “romantic” (12), Libby ultimately finds love with Jake Ross, First Secretary to the Australian Ambassador. As much as these novels are about dating, shopping, career

¹ This thesis uses the terminology of Aboriginal and Indigenous dependent on its context.
and international travel they also feature fiercely politically unapologetic themes and content. In *Not Meeting Mr Right* this entails constructions of Aboriginality and a complication of Australian history. In *Avoiding Mr Right* there is a focus on Aboriginal deaths in custody and the institutionalisation and exploitation of Aboriginality as a field within academia. *Manhattan Dreaming* and *Paris Dreaming* foreground the role of art by Aboriginal artists in maintaining and celebrating culture as well as deconstructing reductive and stereotypical understandings of Aboriginality.

The significance of Heiss’ novels occurs at a number of levels: her representation of urban-based and career-driven young Aboriginal women counters stereotypical understanding of Aboriginality, and as an expression of popular fiction, these novels are taking a political message to a mainstream audience. In her memoir, *Am I Black Enough for You?* (2012), Heiss reflects on her desire to write these novels as a strategic and measured decision:

> My strategy in choosing to write commercial women’s fiction is to reach audiences that weren’t previously engaging with Aboriginal Australia in any format, either personally, professionally or subconsciously. And it is that non-Indigenous female market that is key to my audience: Let’s face it, there are not enough Blackfellas to sustain any publishing venture, least of all an entire genre. With this in mind I made a conscious decision to move into the area of commercial women’s fiction, releasing four books in the genre of chick lit (215).

Heiss’ authorial persona adds another important dimension to the significance of these novels in that she inhabits a multitude of positions in the Australian literary field, thereby appealing to a broad and differentiated audience. Her personal website
Anitsheiss.com describes her as “an author, poet, satirist and social commentator,” and as a “creative disruptor” (2018). In an article published in the Sun Herald in 2008, Catherine Keenan wrote of her conversation with Heiss, “the only question that really seems to stump her is when I ask what her job is. Usually, she says she’s a writer, which is true, but doesn’t quite cover it.” Indeed, Heiss is also an academic, an activist, a public intellectual and an Ambassador for Indigenous Literacy, amongst other titles. She has authored over 149 pieces of writing including six children’s books, eight novels, one memoir, two collections of poetry, and numerous academic articles, and edited five collections of writing by Aboriginal authors (Austlit, n.d.). A recipient of a PhD on the subject matter of Aboriginal literature and the Australian publishing industry (2000), Heiss presents at public appearances as Dr. Anita Heiss. Although demurring that “I don’t even consider myself an academic, even though I’ve jumped through all the hoops” (Heiss 2012, 109), her past institutional affiliations and PhD in literature nevertheless bolster her authority as a public advocate and intellectual on Indigenous affairs.

This thesis, then, is broadly about chick lit, Aboriginality and the reader. In particular, it is about the significance of genre as strategic practice and as an interpretive frame for an author who inhabits a multitude of authorial positions in the Australian literary field. Heiss’ chick lit novels, written between 2007 and 2011, were arguably significant in demonstrating the viability of mainstream Aboriginal literature and other cultural forms, whose success is now evidenced in Ambelin Kyawmullina’s The Tribe
Series (2012 - 2015), Claire Coleman’s *Terra Nullius* (2017), and the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) television series *Redfern Now* (2012- 2015) and *Cleverman* (2016-2017), amongst others. Analysis of Heiss’ novels provides the opportunity to explore the diverse and growing audience of people engaging with Aboriginal authored texts.

**Aims and Significance**

There are a number of different academic and industry definitions of chick lit. In this thesis, I take up Ann Steiner’s (2008) definition of the genre: "good chick lit novels are defined as fun, witty, easy and light reads dealing with real issues. Readers have to be able to sympathise with the main character; identification is, of course, the foundation of the genre" (par. 33). This thesis aims to extend contemporary scholarship on chick lit by proposing an alternative model of analysis for these novels. The approach put forward in this thesis counters a tradition of classifying articulations of chick lit by women of colour as deviations from the argued prototypical chick lit novel. Steiner’s definition of the genre is substantially porous to facilitate this. In opposition to an ideologically focused approach, I propose a sociological model of literary analysis that holistically accommodates the nexus of gender, race, author, text and reader. Drawing on the work of Anne Brewster, I move away from a focus in Australian literary studies that considers the Indigenous author as performing the function of educating the white reader and instead
focus on the concept of the cultural interface as a productive site of cross racial and cultural negotiation (Nakata 2007). Through my analysis of Goodreads reviews of Heiss’ novels I adapt this framework for online communities and extend contemporary scholarship in reading studies that considers book clubs as democratic sites of discussion. This thesis also represents the first sustained analysis of the literature of Anita Heiss who continues a tradition of Aboriginal female authors who write in the confessional mode, but also explores different territory in her depiction of a nascent Aboriginal middle class.

Methodology

This thesis is heavily theory-oriented — it remains a thesis on the chick lit of Anita Heiss — but also contributes to a body of scholarship on new ways of approaching popular fiction: a sociological model, complemented by reader analysis, is one new approach. This thesis integrates a diversity of interdisciplinary approaches, and each chapter is grounded in its own distinct methodology. This includes a methodological approach inspired by Bourdieu’s sociology of literature supplemented by critical scholarship on genre, critical race theory, Australian Indigenous studies, post-colonial literary theory and reading studies. This thesis also incorporates an interview with the author (featured in full in the appendix), textual analysis, and analyses of book reviews.
collected from Goodreads.com, and 34 surveys that were conducted with Goodreads reviewers.

Such an approach seeks to circumvent the polarities and oppositions that characterise scholarship on chick lit, reading studies and nascent scholarship on online book reviewing platforms. This thesis consistently tests the polarities and dichotomies established in each field of research that are invariably demarcated between education vs. enjoyment, formula vs. deviation or subversion, and popular fiction vs. high literature. Complication and resistance to dichotomy and rigidity of classification, thus, becomes an underscoring theme of this thesis producing a reading that accords a more complex and multi-faceted understanding of the chick lit author, reader and novel. This thesis cumulatively suggests that a straight ideological or textual analysis would be insufficient to adequately capture and underscore the significance of these novels.

The significance of this thesis, therefore, lies in its contribution to the development of a new approach to the study of popular fiction — in particular chick lit. Further, it presents an analysis and exploration of the significance of Heiss’ chick lit in the Australian literary field. And, offers a re-consideration of Bourdieu’s sociology of literature incorporative of literature by Aboriginal Australians.
I. The Sociology of Literature and Radical Contextualisation

In this chapter I outline the methodological approach of this thesis and introduce and define the key terminology of “Aboriginal literature” and “racially thematic literature.”

Since its introduction into the academic vernacular in the 1970s, the sociology of literature has remained nebulous, contested and ill-defined. Initially driven by fatigue with restrictive literary thought, early approaches sought to reconcile the disparate disciplines of sociology and literature in pursuit of developing a theoretical model that adequately accounted for the social significance of literature. The approach gained popularity in the 1970s and 80s; driven by the work of Lucien Goldman, John Hall and Raymond Williams as well as the institutional efforts of the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Cultural Studies (1964 -2002) and the Essex Sociology of Literature Project. By the early 1990s, however, the terminology “the sociology of literature” had all but disappeared from the disciplines of literature, sociology and cultural studies (Griswold 1993).

In 1993, in the *Annual Review of Sociology*, Wendy Griswold contemplated the academic status of the sociology of literature, concluding that it had never attained a coherent identity and remained a “non-field” (455). Despite an emergent focus on reception aesthetics, and a reconceptualisation of literary value in relation to the reader, a sociological approach still arguably lacked unification around key questions and debates:

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2 For early examples of this approach, see Williams (1971), Goldmann (1975) and Laurensen (1978).
3 For a comprehensive history of the various incarnations of the sociology of literature, see English (2010), Griswold (2010) and Jadhav (2014).
“the sociology of literature is an ameoba,” she wrote, “it lacks a firm structure, but has flowed along in certain directions nevertheless” (455). In this way, although the term has now largely dropped out of the literary vernacular — encapsulated perhaps under the umbrella terminology of inter-disciplinary studies — the discernible pattern, or “flow,” identified by Griswold in 1993 has arguably continued to consolidate. Largely, advances have been made in studies of the publishing industry and around questions of cultural legitimation (Huggan 2002; Casanova 2004; Gelder 2004; Driscoll 2014; Dalleo 2016), as well as a renewed focus on the social significance of literature (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2013). A special edition of *New Literary History* (2010) partially echoes Griswold’s position, but instead embraces, not laments, the “heterogeneity” (English 2010, xx) of this non-field. The collection presents renewed directions to the sociology of literature that emphasise the significance of pragmatism (McGurl 2010; Love 2010), the reinsertion of ethics and morality back into the schema of literary analysis (Broni and Ilouz 2010; Love 2010), and the incorporation of relatively new areas of study: post-colonial studies and critical race theory (Freedgood 2010; Quayson 2010).

Taken together, a diversity of distinct and complex approaches are now encapsulated in the rough term, the sociology of literature. Owing to the disparate and still

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4 James English (2010) argues that Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984) was instrumental in establishing a precedent for the aforementioned sociological work with its focus on interpretative communities and gendered hierarchies of cultural value: “it was a book that proposed a clear line of departure from normative protocols of literary study, charting a new methodological path in the direction of the social sciences” (xi). It should also be noted that earlier works, such as Gaye Tuchman and Nina Fortin’s study of 18th and 19th century literary culture, *Edging Women Out* (1989) and Bridget Fowler’s *The Alienated Reader* (1991) also bear traces of a sociological approach in their similar emphasis on the gendered construction of literary merit.
“amoeba-like” (Griswold 1993, 455) nature of the sociology of literature, my thesis pursues structure by drawing together a number of different thinkers in this “non-field” (Griswold 1993, 455) that cumulatively produce a pragmatic, but gestalt, interpretative framework analogous to the complexity of Heiss’s literature. This includes: a consideration of Ken Gelder’s study on genre fiction, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (2004) that is supplemented by John Frow’s analysis of genre (2006); an engagement with post-colonial literary theory; an interview conducted with the author; and consideration of reader response theory informed by the approach of Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984).

The overarching methodology of this thesis, and the interpretive framework into which these theorists will be absorbed, is informed by the sociological analysis of Pierre Bourdieu as expressed in the collection of essays *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) and consolidated in *The Rules of Art* (1996).\(^5\) Bourdieu’s work remains perhaps the most developed and complex articulation of a sociology of literature. Randal Johnson appropriately characterises Bourdieu’s reading as “radical contextualisation” (1993, 9) owing to his expansive approach inclusive of the production, circulation and consumption of literary texts. In this chapter I outline Bourdieu’s sociological approach to literature before detailing the departures that my thesis takes.

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\(^5\) While this thesis also draws on the ideas expressed in Bourdieu’s seminal text *Distinction* (1979), it is Bourdieu’s reading of Flaubert’s *A Sentimental Education* (1869) that provides the basic methodological foundation of this thesis.
Bourdieu’s sociology of literature is developed through a reading of Gustave Flaubert’s *A Sentimental Education* (1869); the story of Frederic Moreau, a middle-class Frenchman who harbours aspirations to literary, artistic and social success. Bourdieu’s analysis is developed in opposition to the perceived limitations of existent literary approaches; namely internalist or externalist accounts that are argued to be overly simplistic and reductive. Bourdieu argues that meaning cannot be located within the system of texts themselves but must be understood relationally (1993, 180); that is, both the text and author must be re-inserted back into the field that sustains and produced them. Broadly, the sociological model aims to “unveil” (1993, 158) the text by producing a relational reading built around the concepts of the literary field and the author’s habitus.

Bourdieu defines a field as a “social universe” (1993, 164) governed by particular logics and practices. Society is made up of a number of different fields, including the field of economics, politics and of cultural production, of which the literary field is a sub-set. Each field is a site of struggle — analogised by Bourdieu as a “game” (1993, 184) — that is stratified into two oppositional poles: the heteronomous (economic) and autonomous (symbolic), in which individual actor’s compete for distinguishing forms of capital:

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6 Bourdieu develops this argument in the chapters: “Field of Power, Literary Field and Habitus” (1993, 161 -175) and “Principles for a Sociology of Cultural Works” (1993, 176 – 191). He argues that internal modes of analysis, such as New Criticism, Russian Formalism and Structuralism fail to acknowledge the social and economic conditions of a work of literature. External modes of analysis are argued to be similarly reductive as biographical and historical interpretations focus too much on the idea of influence, and a Marxist approach attends only to politics without attention to the internal language and structure of the text. These approaches disallow room for what Bourdieu terms “the space of possible” (1993, 179), the system of common references and frameworks that cultural producers have in common.
economic, social, symbolic, or cultural. The literary field is divided between the autonomous pole of “art for art’s sake” (1993, 182) also known as the field of restricted production, and the heteronomous pole of “commercial art” (1996, 223) that is also known as the field of large scale production. The latter includes popular writers who cater to a mass market. The position that the author inhabits within any given field is informed by the individual’s habitus, roughly theorised as a culturally acquired collection of embodied practices, properties and dispositions that is generative of action and interpretations (Bourdieu 1990, 53). As argued by Jenkins (1992), the concept of habitus acts as a “bridge building exercise” (74) between the extremes of subjectivism and objectivism in that it retains some understanding of individual agency — captured in the concept of dispositions — while also attending to broader deterministic structures in the form of the field. A mutual consideration of the literary field and the author’s habitus produces a dynamic reading that illuminates the broader constitutive conditions of the role or position of the writer. Significantly, this approach partially accounts for the content of an author’s

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7 The heteronomous and autonomous poles are also discussed as “the field of large scale cultural production” and “the field of restricted production” in Bourdieu’s article, “The Market of Symbolic Goods” (1985).
8 The habitus consists of: “durable transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu 1977, 72). It is further defined by Bourdieu as, “the acquirements, the embodied assimilated properties, such as elegance, ease of manner…that is, the inherited assets which define the possibilities inherent in the field” (Bourdieu 1993, 150).
9 Bourdieu explains this balance in the following way: “If I had to characterise my work in two words, that is, as is the fashion these days, to label it, I would speak of constructivist structuralism or of structuralist constructivism, taking the word structuralism in a sense very different from the one it has acquired in the Saussurean or Levi-Straussian tradition. By structuralism or structuralist, I mean there exist, within the social world itself and not only within symbolic systems (language, myths, etc.), objective structures independent of the consciousness and will of agents, which are capable of guiding and constraining their practices or their representations. By constructivism, I mean that there is a twofold social genesis, on the one hand of the schemes of perception, thought, and action which are constitutive of what I call habits, and on the other hand of social structures, and particularly of what I call fields and of groups, notably those we ordinarily call social classes (Bourdieu 1989, 14).
literary production in that analysis of an author’s position in the literary field illuminates “what artists and writers can say or do” (1993, 166).10

As argued by Beth Driscoll, Bourdieu’s theory of literary production is “a powerful, and flexible tool for understanding cultural behaviour” (2014, 12), and a number of academic texts have drawn on his work to produce comprehensive studies of literary cultures and industries (Tuchman and Fortin 1989; Radway 1984; Huggan 2001; Casanova 2004; Gelder 2004; Driscoll 2014; Dalleo 2016). Bourdieu’s model for textual analysis, on the other hand, has remained relatively unapplied. His reading of A Sentimental Education is a “scientific” approach (1993, 158) to literary analysis that vaguely aims to “unveil the structure that the literary text unveils while still veiling it” (1993, 158). Bourdieu maps the social space and habitus of protagonist Frederic, to produce an argument for an equivalency between the internal and external reality of the text. Ultimately, Bourdieu argues that through Frederic, Flaubert objectifies his own position in French society.11 This understanding is achieved by unpacking the “generative model” (1993, 149) of the novel; an internal logic based on relations of class power and intellectual capital that animates the protagonist’s behaviour. Bourdieu expands on this

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10 “Thus, we must completely reverse the procedure and ask, not how a writer comes to be what he is, in a sort of genetic psycho-sociology, but rather how the position or ‘post’ he occupies - that of a writer of a particular type - became constituted” (Bourdieu 1993, 162).

11 The sociological model considers the characters within a generative model that limits and determines their agency. This understanding is achieved by mapping the social space of protagonist Frederic through field theory supplemented by consideration of the habitus. Ultimately, an understanding of the “sociology of the text” and a comprehension of the generative model makes clear the “sociology of the author” (1993, 161). In the case of A Sentimental Education, this illuminates the “truth” (1993, 158) of the text in which the larger societal struggle of the competing values of art versus business and politics are laid bare.
approach in *The Rules of Art* (1996) in which he argues that “the structure of the book, which a strictly internal reading brings to light, that is, the structure of the social space in which the adventures of Frederic unfold, proves to be at the same time the structure of the social space in which its author himself was situated” (3).

Broadly, Bourdieu’s work has been recurrently criticised as contradictory and paradoxical. Criticism stems from irreconcilability of objective and structural relations in his theorisation of individual action, that are the very artificial divisions that he sought to dismantle. As pointed out by Toril Moi (1997), criticism is demarcated by an interpretative binary that is invested in identifying Bourdieu as either determinist or voluntarist, essentialist or anti-essentialist, and whether he sees subjects as passive or active (507). Critics of his literary approach largely identify a determinism in his work that demonstrates marked inconsistency between his stated methodological approach based on “intensifying the literary experience” (Bourdieu 1996, xvii) and its application that explicitly, read reductively, conflates the literary and the sociological (Dunn 1998; Thomson 2003, 275; Speller 2013, 64). Despite its weaknesses, a number of

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12 Hockx (1998) expands on the nature of this criticism in his article “The Literary Association (Wenxue Yanjiu Hui, 1920–1947) and the Literary Field of Early Republican China.” He writes, “some of these objections can be attributed to a lack of distinction between Bourdieu’s basic theoretical framework (which is value-free) and Bourdieu’s own application of that framework (which is Eurocentric)” (52).

13 Bourdieu’s approach has been interpreted as an affront to literature. Drawing on Guillory (2000), Nicholas Brown and Imre Szeman (2000) draw out the seeming incommensurability of Bourdieu’s approach with dominant forms of literary analysis in that Bourdieu’s work is predicated on ascertaining the social and historical conditions of the text that refutes an “understanding of literary and artistic artefacts as ineffable objects demanding infinite interpretation” (4). In brief, Bourdieu constitutes a threat in his reduction of the ‘literariness’ of the text in his pretension for ‘total explanation.’ Further, Bourdieu’s approach has been criticised for its ‘claims to ‘scientificity’ (Thomson, 275) and as argued by Speller, “Bourdieu’s most ambitious claim is to be able to see the logic not only of writer’s social position-takings (between publishers, groups, genres, etc.) but also that behind their construction of literary works” (64).
theorists have argued for the ongoing significance of Bourdieu’s approach and encourage further scholarship to be developed in the area. John Speller (2013) defends Bourdieu’s approach from its interpretation as an “attack on literary culture” (16) and argues that, although at times perhaps disenchanting, his approach is theoretically sophisticated and unlike other dominant forms of criticism, attends to the social significance of literature. This perspective is shared by Johnathon Eastwood (2007) who argues for the dynamic potential of a sociological approach:

It seems to offer an escape from old schools of structural determinism and individual voluntarism, it allows for the possibility of recognising the centrality of culture in social life without treating it as a disembodied whole, autonomous from those aspects of social life we usually call “structural,” and it introduces a loose conceptual terminology (most notably the concepts of habitus and field) that has already begun to transform social-theoretical discourse (154).

In an interview with Loic Wacquant (1989), Bourdieu responded to some of the dominant criticisms regarding perceived tensions and paradoxes in his work: “let me say outright and very forcefully that I never ‘theorise,’ if by that we mean engage in the kind of conceptual gobbledygook… There is no doubt a theory in my work, or, better a set of thinking tools visible through the results they yield, but it is not built as such” (50). Bourdieu’s characterisation of his work as a “set of thinking tools” is a particularly productive way to understand his approach overall. This understanding also coheres with

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14 Both Speller and Eastwood argue that Bourdieu’s sociology of literature remains “relatively under-analysed” (Eastwood 149) and has received little attention (Speller 13).
the pragmatic and diverse approaches to literary analysis already proposed in *New Literary History* (2010).

As such, Bourdieu’s formation of cultural analysis is sufficiently gestalt, but adaptable, to allow a holistic reading of Heiss’ literature that accounts for its significance within the Australian literary landscape. Primarily, Bourdieu’s body of work is thematically concerned with the role of the symbolic in the legitimation of social order, and as such, attends to the broader question of the social significance of literature. Further, Bourdieu does partially account for the nexus of the author, reader and text that remains absent from other dominant forms of literary analysis. Within the scope of this thesis, I apply this focus to pursue the broad question: what power does literature bear for producing personal and social transformation? With relation to Anita Heiss, I am interested in how this question plays out with reference to available discourses and understandings of Aboriginality, Australian history, racial identity and belonging within the Australian context. In the next section I will outline how my own methodological approach departs from other scholarship on field theory and popular fiction.

Scholarship on popular fiction is an emergent and rapidly expanding field of enquiry that continues to distinguish itself from more traditional forms of literary criticism. Ken Gelder’s landmark study, *Popular Fiction: The logics and practices of a literary field* (2004) largely established the methodological parameters for research on popular fiction and remains an important point of reference for this thesis. In this text
Gelder moves towards an understanding of popular fiction as a definitive field characterised by genre, industry and entertainment.\textsuperscript{15} Gelder takes up Bourdieu’s expression of the autonomous and heteronomous poles of each artistic field to locate popular fiction on the latter end, in that, “popular fiction is a kind of industrial practice” (15). Literature and popular fiction are expressed as opposites of each other. Genre for Gelder provides the primary logics of popular fiction in its “means of production, formal and industrial identification and critical evaluation” (40). For each respective genre, certain logics and practices determine what occurs within the novel, similarly, each genre generates its own cultural logic, its “homology,” which Gelder defines as “a set of attitudes and practices that seem to fit the kinds of things the genre stands for” (81).\textsuperscript{16}

The reason I have chosen to retain Bourdieu, and not Gelder, as my foundational guiding theorist is for the vestigial emphasis that Bourdieu accords to the author. In opposition to earlier scholarship that had largely focused on single authors to the detriment of an understanding of the field as a whole, Gelder is invested in the definition of popular fiction as an identifiable field of study. Although he does provide case studies of popular fiction authors, they are considered within the broadly theorised frame of popular fiction and are presented as curtailed or simply operating within already defined formulas and rules. Indeed, in accordance with an understanding of popular fiction as “a

\textsuperscript{15} Gelder argues that the defining features of popular fiction are, “its role as ‘entertainment,’ its self identification as a form of industrial production or ‘manufacture,’ and its commercial and merchandising potential” (2004, 35).

\textsuperscript{16} Gelder also defines genre as, “the type or species of fiction being written” (40).
kind of industrial practice” (15), Gelder defines those who write popular fiction as “writers,” as opposed to “authors” (15). Such a conception of the author is conceived in relation to their circumscription of movement; their location within firmly established logics and practices of the genre and obligation to market forces. Throughout this thesis, I complicate this academic conception of genre. Drawing on the work of Hans Robert Jauss (1970) and John Frow (2006), I propose an understanding of genre as a regulative “frame.” Genre, as a “fuzzy” and “historically contingent” organisational practice (Frow 2006, 80), is something that is imputed by the reader to the text; and operates to contextualise and delimit its interpretation. While I do not seek to advance a new definition of genre in this thesis, I do put forward an understanding of genre as a “framing device,” as inspired by Frow’s analysis.

I follow Bourdieu’s line in asserting that an ideological reading of the text, or any kind of kind of purely internal interpretation, does not suffice. I agree with Bourdieu’s suggestion that “it can only be an unjustifiable abstraction to seek the source of the understanding of cultural productions in these productions themselves, taken in isolation and divorced from the conditions of their production and utilization” (Bourdieu 1988, xvii). Therefore, any analysis of a literary text must take into account factors in its production and reception. As expressed by Johnson (1993) in his summary of the Field of Cultural Production, “to be fully understood, literary works must be reinserted in the system of social relations which sustains them. This does not imply a rejection of aesthetic
or formal properties, but rather an analysis based on their position in relation to the universe of possibilities of which they are a part” (11). In so doing, I avoid essentialist understandings of the text and push against a universal or ahistorical conception of literature. My thesis, thus, engages with the complex network of social relations that make the existence of the text possible (Johnson 1993, 10). While Gelder’s work remains influential, I eschew his predominant focus on industry and entertainment for Bourdieu’s more holistic approach.

Bourdieu proposes a three-tiered analysis of A Sentimental Education: a reading of the internal logics of the novel, a consideration of the literary field, and finally, an analysis of the author’s habitus. For my own analysis of Heiss’ literature I re-interpret Bourdieu’s approach to focus on three key areas of my own definition: the author, the page and the reader. Broadly, this thesis considers the political significance of literature as a medium for reconciliation, through a sustained complication of academic understandings of genre and popular fiction. Significantly, this thesis also presents original material in the form of thematic analysis of reviews of Heiss’ literature from the book reviewing site Goodreads, surveys collected from readers of Heiss’ fiction, and an interview conducted with the author. As pointed out by Elizabeth Harries (1997), and re-enforced by Toril Moi (1997), Bourdieu’s cultural analysis is grounded in an immense mass of social and cultural data: “prefaces, footnotes, dedications, earnings, sales, quarrels, silences” (Harries, 473). Any scholarship interested in applying Bourdieu’s
sociological approach to culture must also attend to such concrete data. As argued by Moi, scholarship that only attends to the broad thematics of his work cannot surmount a demarcation of his thinking as either wholly deterministic or voluntaristic. I would now like to outline in detail my interpretation of my three key terms.

**The Author**

In this chapter I consider the author within the Bourdieusian concepts of position taking, and strategy in order to unpack the differentiated authorial positions that Heiss inhabits within the Australian literary field.\(^\text{17}\) To add to how agents assume different positions within the literary field, Bourdieu develops the idea of strategy as distinct from rules. As articulated by Anderson, “in his theory of practice Bourdieu accounted for the differences he identified between what people did and what the rules suggest they would do by using the term *strategy*” (2016, 695). As defined by Bourdieu, “it is the product of a practical sense, of a particular social game” (Lamaison 1986, 112). Bourdieu is primarily concerned with how cultural products contribute to the reproduction of the social order, however, as argued by Hockx and Smits (2003), Bongie (2008), Brouillette (2016) and Dalleo (2016)

\(^{17}\) Bourdieu explicitly discusses how agents assume different positions within the literary field in the essay “Principles for A Sociology of Cultural Works” in *The Field of Cultural Production*. He writes: “to the extent that they occupy a position in a specific space... authors only exist and subsist under the structured constraints of the field (e.g. the objective relations that are established between genres). They affirm the differential deviation which constituted their position, their point of view - understood as the perspective from a given point in the field- by assuming, actually or virtually, one of the possible aesthetic positions in the field (and thus assuming a position in relation to other positions). By being well situated - and writers or artists have no choice but to situate themselves - they distinguished themselves, even without searching for distinction” (184).
his delineation of the literary field as governed by either the principle of economic gain or literary prestige does not allow for the possibilities of opposition and critique.\textsuperscript{18} I draw on the work of Huggan (2001), Boschetti (2006), Dalleo (2016) and Casanova (2004) to broaden the parameters of the literary field to incorporate this political dimension. Instead of presenting a broad re-conceptualisation of the Australian literary field, I draw on Heiss’ dissertation \textit{Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight} (2003), and my own conversations with the author, to present an understanding that “what is at stake” in Heiss’ literature is not just market success, but also the power that literature yields for social transformation. That is, the engagement of her readership in complex representations of race and history in the Australian context. This is explored through a consideration of a history of writing by Aboriginal authors and I employ the term “Aboriginal writing” to refer to literature authored by Aboriginal Australians that features political content. This definition is drawn from Heiss and Peter Minter’s (2008) understanding of “Aboriginal authorship,” that is defined as both “a practice and literary category” and is representative of “the nexus between the literary and the political” (3). This chapter attends to the distinctiveness of the position that Heiss inhabits in the Australian literary field inclusive of diverse mechanisms of artistic legitimation: the university, the publishing industry and reviews of her chick lit published in newspapers and literary journals. Firstly, I draw on Lahire’s (2010) conception of the “second job” (450) to explore how Heiss’ academic career has

\textsuperscript{18} For discussion of Bourdieu and social reproduction through culture see, “The Market of Symbolic Goods” (Bourdieu 1985)
supplemented and continues to inform her authorial identity and practice. Secondly, I explore her understanding of genre as strategic practice and, finally, I consider critical reviews of Heiss’ literature that demonstrate a dissonant understanding of her authorial persona. These reviews reflect an interpretative divide delineated between an affirmation of the political dimension of her work and criticism of its articulation as popular fiction.

The Page

In Chapter Three I attend to formal scholarship on genre as another institutional mechanism of literary legitimation and consecration and consider some of the limitations of contemporary scholarship on chick lit. Although Bourdieu does not directly theorise genre, I take up Gelder’s conception of popular fiction as a way of interrogating contemporary scholarship. Scholarship on chick lit emphasises the genre's political significance as a way of redressing the hierarchy of literary value implicit in the academy. This ideological approach is further accompanied by an argument that chick lit is a distinctive genre. I suggest that a purely ideological and genre based approach is restrictive in that it reduces enquiry to either the question of adherence or deviation from formula, or to simplistic enquiry into the feminist credentials of the text. This approach proves particularly problematic when applied to non-white articulations of chick lit that are invariably discussed as distinct, deviant, or subversive. Through a reading of the limited scholarship written on Heiss (Ommundsen 2011; Mathew 2016), alongside the work of Anne Brewster (2007; 2008; 2015), Martin Nakata (2007), and consideration
of the literary field outlined in Chapter One, I propose an approach that replaces an internal reading of the novels with a focus on the reader herself. I take up Frow’s articulation of genre as a “frame,” that operates to guide reader expectations, in place of Gelder’s conception that focuses more rigidly on logics and practices. This approach allows for a consideration of the social significance of the novels, rather than just their internal politics.

The Reader

The omission of the reader from Bourdieu's triangulated mode of analysis constitutes a significant gap in his scholarship. Indeed, Bourdieu himself seems partially aware of the significance of this oversight when in discussion of Flaubert’s literary field he parenthetically laments: “we should also have talked about relationships with the audience” (1993, 189). Later, in The Rules of Art and On Television and Journalism (1998), Bourdieu does consider the role of the audience, but only insofar as reception is socially structured and bound by determinate class relations. This argument is largely the extension of ideas laid out in Distinction (1979) that argue for an understanding of cultural consumption as both intensifying and reproducing class inequalities. In recent years, reader-response theory, and more general reception studies, has substantially complicated an understanding of the passive audience. For example, in her study of the reading tastes of Scottish women, The Alienated Reader (1991), Bridget Fowler explicitly confounds Bourdieu’s analysis to argue for a re-reading of popular art as self-consciously
political and as a means of empowering cultural mobility. Beginning with Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women Patriarchy and Popular Culture* (1984), this chapter draws on recent theorisations of the reader to explore the social significance of Heiss’ chick lit. My own analysis is less interested in considering the significance of class in a reading audience, as I am interested in how the reader engages with the literature of Anita Heiss with respect to the discussion undertaken in the sections on the author and the page that concerns representations of race. In particular, I am interested in how readers attend to this political dimension of her novels. As raised over the course of this thesis, a focus on reader response is a productive movement away from the limitations of genre scholarship. Further, discussion about the politically transformative and resistant nature of Aboriginal literature also gently directs consideration towards the social impact of these novels. In this chapter I analyse reader reviews collected from the book reviewing website Goodreads and I draw on scholarship about “racially thematic literature” as a means of guiding discussion on Heiss’ literature. Racially thematic literature is that which makes race as a social construct and organising logic of society apparent to the reader. Goodreads can be partially theorised as an expression of “the intimate public sphere” conceptualised by Lauren Berlant (1997). According to Berlant, the intimate public sphere is a “juxtapolitical” (x) affective space in which participants experience a sense of social belonging through shared participation in
consumer culture (viii). Goodreads is an ambiguous platform, neither entirely a social networking site nor merely a book reviewing site. Goodreads, therefore, is a productive site for considering how Heiss’ literature contributes to broader social debate in that it provides a space for affective discussion centred around literature. Ultimately, the analysis undertaken in this chapter confounds academic understandings of the cogency of genre as an interpretative tool, as Heiss’ readers are demonstrated to be diverse and differentiated.

19 For Berlant (1997) “juxtapolitical” describes proximate political discussion; she writes, “in this book I call women’s culture ‘juxtapolitical’ because, like most mass-mediated non-dominant communities, that of feminine realist sentimentality thrives in proximity to the political, occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics, but most often not, acting as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough” (x).
II. The Author: Heiss’ Position in the Australian Literary Field

In this chapter I consider the author within the Bourdieusian concepts of position taking and strategy in order to explore how Heiss has produced her authorial identity with respect to the distinctive philosophies and principles that underscore her work. This chapter draws on Heiss’ discussion of her writing practice as well as critical reviews of her chick lit novels to explore the complex — yet strategically coherent — position she inhabits in the Australian literary field. Bourdieu argues that “we cannot understand the significance of the actions of particular agents or organisation in literary culture until we understand the position they occupy” (1996, 85). At first glance, Heiss does not seem to inhabit a conventional authorial position within the literary field. She is not clearly aligned with either the heteronomous or autonomous poles of the field. Instead, she fuses the logics and practices of popular fiction with the ideas and concerns of her academic work. Her chick lit novels achieved respectable sales figures, but were not breakout bestsellers. On the other hand, and unlike most popular fiction, the novels have achieved some degree of literary consecration as reflected in their inclusion on a number of Australian university courses (Austlit, n.d.). According to Bourdieu, the literary field is a site of constant

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20 In interviews, essays, blog posts and other public appearances Heiss has spoken at length about the philosophies, motivations and principles that underpin her work. This material is referenced in detail throughout this chapter. None-the-less, this chapter still foregrounds Heiss’ voice as expressed in the interview that was conducted specifically in relation to this thesis. Following on from the model established in Anne Brewster’s *Giving this Country a Memory* (2015), this approach resists the “objectification of the author” by “taking scholastic ideas to the author’s themselves in the tradition of collaboration and exchange” (Brewster, xii). It remains imperative that as a settler researcher, working from an academic institution, that Heiss’ voice is foregrounded to discuss and expand on ideas that are generated in an institutional setting.

21 My thanks to to Nielson Book scan for assistance on locating these figures.
“struggle” (1993, 184) as new positions within the field are constantly contested and re-negotiated. Heiss’ movements between these positions are demonstrative of exactly this kind of authorial position creation. This chapter explores the marked success of this careful manoeuvring through critical reviews of her chick lit novels. Ultimately, the success of Heiss’ strategising is reflected in the diverse and differentiated reading publics that these reviews imply.22

Bourdieu’s sociology of literature is a three tiered analysis: the locating of the literary field within the field of power, the positioning of agents within the literary field, and the tracing of the genesis of the author’s habitus. The concept of habitus seeks to attends to an individual’s agency and external structures in theorising their actions. The concept, nonetheless, runs the risk of flattening the dynamism and creativity of the author in question. With respect to Heiss, I am conscious that an uncritical application of the term perhaps encourages a reading that may reduce Heiss’ identity as an Aboriginal woman to an essentialist understanding of identity.23 Some consideration of habitus remains necessary, however, I retain a focus on language specific to the analysis of the field that is supplemented by Heiss’ own discussion of her writing practice.

22 In her study, The New Literary Middlebrow (2014), Beth Driscoll offers a sustained study of the literary middlebrow that is defined by eight identifying features: middle-class, reverential towards elite culture, entrepreneurial, mediated, feminized, emotional, recreational and earnest (17 - 43). Heiss’ authorial practice only partially reflects Driscoll’s definition of the middlebrow, therefore, this thesis argues for an understanding of Heiss’ authorial position within the literary field as complex and unique.

23 As pointed out by Jenkins (1992), there does seem to be a further paradox implicit in Bourdieu’s imagining of the field and the author’s habitus, in that the field is argued to be constitutive of an author’s habitus, rather than the habitus as something that is brought to bear on the field” (85).
The locating of the field of literature relative to the field of power is the first step in Bourdieu’s analysis. Writing and the public role or identity of the author has historically played a powerful role in Aboriginal activism and resistance since Aboriginal identity became subject to bureaucratic definition and control. Rather than working from Bourdieu’s model that maps the literary field, we can instead consider Heiss’ conception of the field, its position relative to the field of power, autonomy and what is “at stake.”

The “Third” Principle: Identity and Education

Motivated by prestige or wealth, Bourdieu’s model of authorial action is largely individualistic, self-serving and eschews the possibility for community oriented and politically resistant art. In the post-script to *The Rules of Art* Bourdieu introduces the potential that literature can yield for political critique, an argument absent from his analysis in *The Field of Cultural Production*. He argues, however, that the power of a sub-field is defined only by its “disinterestedness,” as the market “places demands” on the author which ultimately compromises any potential for critique. Autonomy, then, is defined by the capacity to resist these demands (Bourdieu 1996, 217). Bourdieu’s argument, thus, only consolidates an understanding of popular art and culture as not only artistically inferior, but also as ideologically suspect and compromised.

Bourdieu’s theorisation has recently been re-addressed, predominantly by scholars in post-colonial literary studies. This thesis incorporates post-colonial literary theory as
conducive with the Australian context. Although Australia is not a post-colonial nation, this thesis takes up the line of argument advanced by Nathaniel O’Reilly in *Post-colonial Issues in Australian Literature* (2010) in that “post-colonial reading strategies provide immensely productive ways for analysing Australian texts” (2). In the collection *Bourdieu and Post-colonial Studies* (2016) editor Raphael Dalleo emphasises the potential that a Bourdieusian sociological approach yields for the study of post-colonial literature.24 In opposition to the “high theory abstraction” (2) that is argued to dominate post-colonial studies, Dalleo suggests that Bourdieu offers a more grounded approach inclusive of the “material nature” (2) of literary production. In a departure from dichotomy that Bourdieu establishes between art and the market, contributor Sarah Brouillette suggests that this relationship is in fact “dialectical” (80), and not oppositional. She proposes that other forms of capital be theorised as animating agents within the literary field. Dalleo re-enforces this position and argues that post-colonial literature cannot be singularly interpreted as governed by either literary prestige or the mass market (8). As argued by Dalleo, “post-colonial studies conceives of itself as not just seeking to interpret the world, but to change it” (8). That is, post-colonial literature is political, in its most explicit sense invested in the potential for political and social transformation.25 Dalleo and Brouillette’s

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25 In the article, “Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse” (1987), Helen Tiffin argues that, “these subversive manoeuvres, rather than the construction of the essentially national or regional, are what are characteristic of post-colonial texts, as the subversive is characteristic of post-colonial discourse in general. Post-colonial literatures/cultures are thus constituted in counter-discursive rather than homologous practices, and they offer fields of counter-discursive strategies to the dominant discourse” (18).
understanding of Bourdieu is significant in that they theorise the possibility of oppositional and critical writing — even in an increasingly or wholly commercial field. Like Brouillette, Graham Huggan (2001) argues for a dialectical understanding of the literary field by suggesting that post-colonial authors are pulled between “two principal regimes of value” (6): “a politics of value that stands in obvious opposition to global processes of commodification” (6) and, “a regime of value implicitly assimilative and market driven” (6). Outside post-colonial studies, Michel Hockx and Ivo Smits (2003), scholars of early modern Chinese literary culture, have also complicated Bourdieu’s bipolaric understanding of the literary field to argue for the existence of a “third principle” (225) that is largely community oriented, “partly but not fully heteronomous, which motivates modern Chinese writers to consider as part of their practice, the well being of their country and their people” (225).

It is clear that Heiss’ literary practice cannot be schematised into the two conflicting principles definitive of Bourdieu’s analysis of the French literary field. Heiss’ discussions of her own writing practice partly reflect Huggan’s definition of the post-colonial literary field in that she demonstrates a dual investment in a mass market readership, as well as — in the tradition of other Aboriginal authors — a desire for her literature to be political and transformative.

26 Autonomy simply means the potential that literature has to be oppositional to dominant discourse, see ROA (344).
This is demonstrated most coherently in a number of quotes taken from her memoir *Am I Black Enough For You?* Heiss’ memoir was written partly in response to the racial discrimination lawsuit that Heiss and nine other Aboriginal Australians brought against Andrew Bolt (2011).27 Bolt was found to have contravened section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act through the publication of his articles, “It’s so hip to be black” (2009a), “White is the New Black” (2009b), and “White Fellas in the Black” (2009c). These articles argued that “fair-skinned” Aboriginal people were trading on their Aboriginal heritage for career reward and advantage (“Bolt Breached Discrimination Act” 2011). Bolt wrote, “I’m saying only that this self-identification as Aboriginal strikes me as self-obsessed, and driven more by politics than by any racial reality” (2009a). Heiss begins her memoir with a direct acknowledgment of her dual heritage, the focus of Bolt’s attack, in order to intimately connect her authorial voice to her family and community:

I aim to use my writing to reclaim pride in our status as First Nations people…to use my published words as a vehicle for asserting my individual and communal identity, to instil pride in others, and to help non-Aboriginal people better understand us. I hope that, in turn, we can all then improve our understanding of ourselves and our collective Australian identity (6).

A second significant quotation comes later in the memoir, “my strategy in choosing to write commercial women’s fiction is to reach audiences that weren’t previously engaging

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27 The other individuals who sued Andrew Bolt included ATSIC chairman Geoff Clark, academic Professor Larissa Behrendt, activist Pat Eatock, photographer Bindi Cole, health worker Leeanne Enoch, native title expert Graham Atkinson, academic Wayne Atkinson and lawyer Mark McMillan (“Bolt Breached Discrimination Act” 2011).
with Aboriginal Australia in any format, either personally, professionally or subconsciously. And it is that non-Indigenous female market that is key to my audience” (215). Heiss, thus, articulates the significance of her writing as dually an exercise in reclamation and celebration of identity, and, as offering the possibility for producing social change through engagement with non-Indigenous Australians. This quote also encapsulates the idea of alternative forms of capital theorised by Hockx and Smits. Heiss’ discussion of her writing practice explicitly identifies the significance and value of literature as a tool for self-representation and definition underscored by an obligation and connection to community. Heiss does also discuss her writing as a pedagogical tool: “I want them to learn things, but I want all my books to teach in some way” (Heiss 2017). But, her approach is more evocative of the language of reconciliation, with an emphasis on understanding, assistance and discussion, than it is bluntly didactic: “I’m trying to create something that has a lasting life and will be used in classrooms to generate conversations and help people understand their role in society” (Heiss 2017).

Heiss is connected to a long tradition of politically active Aboriginal writers. Literature (letters, petitions, poetry, painting) has consistently played a role in Aboriginal

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28 The process of reconciliation in Australia formally began with the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991. Guided by the vision of “a united Australia which respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all,” the council established a 10-year time frame to advance the national process of reconciliation. Very basically, reconciliation is an ongoing process that encourages the ‘coming together’ of and non- Australia based on mutual understanding, recognition and respect. In 2001 Reconciliation Australia, an independent not-for-profit organisation, was established to continue the council’s work. Their vision for reconciliation is based on five inter-related dimensions: race relations, equality and equity, unity, institutional integrity and historical acceptance. Their Strategic Plan for 2017-2022 argues that “these five dimensions do not exist in isolation; they are inter-related, and Australia can only achieve full reconciliation if we progress in all five” (“Reconciliation Action Plan”).
political resistance, self-definition and determination. In the collection *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* (2008), editors Peter Minter and Anita Heiss present the first collection of literature written in English by Aboriginal authors from the 18th century to the present. This collection not only presents a comprehensive history of “ Aboriginal literature,” (2) but more generally articulates a coherence of voice across 200 years, thus, defining Aboriginal authorship as a “practice and literary category” that represents “the nexus between the literary and the political.” (3) Minter and Heiss outline how historically literature produced by Aboriginal Australians has been politically charged. From Bennelong’s letter (1792), to Oodgeroo Noonucul’s poetry collection *We Are Going* (1967), to Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987), Aboriginal writing has fought and resisted marginalisation and oppression.\(^{29}\)

\(^{29}\) Drawing on this collection, the history of Aboriginal writing may be summarised in the following distinct stages: letter writing, traditional stories, activist authors and poetry and life writing. The history of letter writing includes those written by individuals to local authorities and newspapers and community led petitions. Notable examples include Wangal man Bennelong’s letter to ‘Mr Philips, Stewart to Lord Sydney’ in 1792 and the Coranderrk petition (1886) compiled by Wurundjeri activist, diplomat and elder, William Barak — which petitioned against the closure of the Coranderrk settlement and advocated for Aboriginal rights to their own land. The history of traditional stories includes the work of Ngarrindjeri preacher, inventor and writer David Unaipon. His collection of traditional stories, *Native Legends* (1929) has been credited as the first publication by an author. In an era of assimilationist politics, Unaipon’s collection represented the reclamation of pride in cultural practice. The history of activist writing and poetry includes Oodgeroo Noonucul’s poetry collection *We Are Going* (1967) that represented the beginning of a tradition of Aboriginal activist poetry. Noonucul’s writing both informed and constituted her political activism. Poetry remains one of the most important genres in Aboriginal political and creative literature. Amongst many others, this includes: Lisa Bellear, Romaine Moreton, Gary Foley, Sam Watson and Jeanine Leanne. The history of life writing includes the autobiographical and testimonial fiction that characterised much of the writing of the 1980s and 1990s. Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987), Doris Pilkington’s *The Rabbit Proof Fence* (1996) and Ruby Langford Ginibi’s *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* (1988) spoke back to a dominant historical narrative that disavowed violence perpetrated against Australia. Further, their work challenged deficit understandings of Aboriginality represented in mainstream media and legislation. Aboriginal literature today is diverse and multifaceted, and authors continue to expand into new genres and forms of storytelling. These include young adult fiction (Ambelin Kwaymullina), science fiction (Ellen Van Neervan and Claire Coleman) and critically acclaimed literary fiction such as the novels by Miles Franklin award winning authors Kim Scott and Alexis Wright.
Bourdieu characterises agents in the cultural field as “dominated dominators,” that is, they are structurally subordinate but with the symbolic power to legitimate or discredit the dominant group. As argued by Heiss and Minter, Aboriginal writing is characterised by “the nexus between the literary and the political” (2014, 3). Contrary to Bourdieu’s understanding of the literary field as demarcated between prestige and wealth, the history of Aboriginal writing is intimately connected to, and motivated by, social and political change. Explicitly, the power of Aboriginal writing has transcended the symbolic establishing it not only as a space for critique but also an instigator of political change.

The relationship between language and power is already well established in post-colonial studies as is the connection between language, identity and representation in Australian Indigenous studies. As theorised by Foucault, discourse is the name for the language by which dominant groups within society constitute the field of “truth” through the imposition of specific knowledges, disciplines, and values (Young 1981). In *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* (1992) Stephen Muecke argues that, “Aboriginality is constructed in discourse” (19). Language produces the object of its reference, and historically, Aboriginal people have been textually constructed in three distinct discourses: the Anthropological, the Romantic and the Racist (24). Each of these discourses objectify, romantiscise and portray Aboriginal people as non-normative and “other.” Patrick Wolfe (2006) argues that colonisation is not an event but a structure, that is reinforced by the discourse and legitimating language of terra-nullius that excludes and
marginalises Aboriginal people (388). This denial of the right to Indigenous self-definition and determination operates as a mechanism of the logic that then upholds the structure of colonialism. Further, Marcia Langton’s essay, *Well I Heard it on the Radio and Saw it on the Television* (1993), highlights a history of distorted and offensive representations of Aboriginal people in Australian film and other cultural products that operate to erase Aboriginal identity. Drawing on the work of E. Ann Kaplan, Langton discusses how these representations produce an “absence” of Aboriginal identity that is also constituted by its distorted “presence” (24).

Aboriginal literature is, thus, doubly an exercise in opposition and critique — an affront to colonial discourse — but also a site of cultural reclamation and pride. It is an intervention in a history of misrepresentation and bureaucratic categorisation, and it is within this tradition that Heiss’ literature must be read. Indeed, Heiss clearly articulates this herself, in “Blackwords: Writers on Identity” (2014), Heiss writes, “the act of writing often becomes more than solely creative for authors who use the process as a vehicle for analysing, understanding, asserting, determining and defining their own identity”. Further, in *Am I Black Enough for You* she contends that, “Aboriginal writers have been writing our literature as a means of publicly defining ourselves and as a tool to define our right to identity” (5).
The Second Job

In addition to contextualising Heiss’ writing within a tradition of Aboriginal literature, Heiss’ academic work and career must also be considered as a significant part of her authorial persona and the way that her literature is received by a reading public. In “The Double Life of Writers” (2010) Bernard Lahire complicates Bourdieu’s conception of the literary field. The literary field is arguably distinct from other fields owing to the dual membership of its participants. Most authors are arguably plural actors who possess a “second job” (45) in a distinct field to supplement their authorial practice. Lahire argues that field theory has been largely silent on the influence and significance of “out of field practice” (447) as it relates to the literary field. As argued by Lahirem “the frequent double life of writers is not an anodyne or insignificant fact, but are absolutely central facts of literary life” (446).

In accordance with Lahire’s conception of the second job, Heiss has moved between the academic and literary fields at different points in her career, sometimes participating in both simultaneously. These shifts have been both political and economic in motivation. Heiss’ recent return to academia as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Canberra demonstrates the way that these two fields can be mutually inclusive or complementary as she is participating in co-authoring a book with an Aboriginal community (Pham 2017).
Throughout her career Heiss has been employed in a number of different occupations across the field of cultural production, politics and education. She has spent time, briefly, in the public service (Heiss 2012, 100) and in independent arts organisations (Heiss 2012, 44). Most consistently, however, Heiss’ second job could be identified as her work in academia. In 2004 she was a part-time writer in residence at Macquarie University (Heiss 2012, 114), between 2005-2006 she was deputy director of the Warawara Department of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University, and she has also been employed as a full-time writer and associate professor at the Western Sydney University, attached to the Badanami Centre for Indigenous Studies (“Anita’s Career”).

Heiss’ PhD dissertation, later published by Aboriginal Studies Press as *Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight-Publishing Indigenous Literature* (2003), established her as an authority on the Australian publishing industry as it relates to Aboriginal authorship. She has published extensively on literary criticism, predominantly in the Australian literary journals *Southerly*, *Meanjin* and *The Griffith Review* and the book chapters “Writing Aboriginality: Authors on Being Aboriginal” that appears in *A Companion to Australian Literature since 1900* (2007). She has also co-edited the collection *The Macquarie Pen Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* (2008) and composed the “Blackwords Essays” for the online Australian literature database Austlit. Although Heiss writes in her memoir, “I don’t even consider myself an academic, even though I’ve jumped through all the hoops” (109), in public appearances and presentations she is acknowledged and introduced as Dr.
Anita Heiss. Her past and present institutional affiliations, PhD in literature and substantial publication history contribute significantly to her authorial identity as she translates the cultural capital of academia into the broader literary field.

The relationship between the literary and academic fields is of great significance when considering Aboriginal literature. For Heiss, there is a homology between the principles that motivate her work in the literary and academic fields. Heiss reflects on the research behind her PhD as being driven by a desire to “give a voice to Aboriginal Australian literature, because I wanted students in the future to be able to quote us, and not just another white academic” (Heiss 2012, 107). Heiss emphasises the significance of the production of scholarship by Aboriginal Australians to counter a tradition of objectifying and racist scholarship. The aforementioned quote not only reflects the significance of self-representation, but more broadly acknowledges the importance of doing this within the academic field in that universities are sites of knowledge creation and education. Accordingly, Heiss has discussed universities as sites of consecration and legitimation of Aboriginal literature. In an interview conducted with the author, Heiss said:

I had a conversation with a poet recently who is quite down on academia and you know: ‘it hasn’t done anything for me,’ and I had to say, ‘you need to stop saying that, because there are people working in universities who are teaching your work.’ And you go and have a look, and you know, if you win an award it is usually a university award and you know universities they’re probably the biggest buyers of your books and are actually reading them and talking about them. So you can criticise universities but that’s where the conversations are happening, particularly with poetry, it’s not happening in book clubs necessarily or on the beach (2017).
Heiss has recently returned to academia in a position as a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Canberra (Pham 2017). In this position she is involved in a collaborative literary project with a remote community (Heiss 2017). Heiss reflects that such projects were not an option in academia during the time that she was undertaking her PhD and that the academy is now shifting in alignment with her own goals (Heiss 2017). Heiss does identify limitations of the academic context at a personal and collective level with respect to the promotion and advocacy of Indigenous affairs. She re-iterates a conception of the academy as divorced and distinct from “the real world” (2012, 105). In Am I Black Enough for You? she reflects on the insularity of the academic community as well as its remove from the politics that it ostensibly promulgates. She writes, “I never understood the point of academics talking purely to academics when those in the ‘real’ world needed and wanted to engage as well” (131). Here, Heiss is not only identifying the exclusionary and elitist nature of academic practice and institutions, but also the need for academics to take their knowledge to the public. The language of academic discourse plays a large part in this. Heiss discusses the peculiarity of the efforts to define Aboriginality that only “alienated” (2012, 131) those who were the object of this enquiry. Heiss identifies her position in academia as “privileged,” underscored by the responsibility to take knowledge back to the broader mainstream and Indigenous community: “I need to use my position and my privilege to help others in the community make the most of the rights our peoples have fought for” (Heiss 2012, 14).
Heiss does acknowledge, however, the role that academia played in establishing her career as a fiction author. While finishing her PhD at UNSW she was invited by Scholastic to publish a children’s book that would eventually become *Who Am I? The Diary of Mary Talence* (2006). In this case the structured nature of her academic training provided the basis for the publication of her first novel:

I think I had already submitted my PhD or was in the process of submitting my PhD — and I was invited by Scholastic to write a kid’s novel, which is *Who Am I? The Diary of Mary Talence, Sydney 1937* and it was actually a really good way of moving into writing fiction because it was a very simple format which was a diary over 12 months and so I was given the structure, given the word length, I was given the age of character and the reading audience. So all I had to do was write the story with all these guidelines; and, some people might find that that those boundaries are quite strict, but for me was a great intro into moving out of non-fiction and a PhD — which is a completely different way of reading and of writing — to being creative (Heiss 2017).

Following this publication Heiss expanded into the genre of chick lit with the publication of *Not Meeting Mr Right*.

Although Heiss’ fiction publications outwardly position her as an author of popular fiction at the heteronomous pole of the literary field, she has a certain status within the education system. Within the academic field, Heiss’ novels have been taught at a number of Australian universities: *Not Meeting Mr Right* was taught in literature subjects at the University of Newcastle and Macquarie University from 2011 to 2014. *Avoiding Mr Right* has been taught in two literature subjects at the University of Newcastle and the University

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30 Thanks to Nielson Book scan for assistance on determining sales figures
of Wollongong from 2011-2012, and *Manhattan Dreaming* was taught in a literature subject at Macquarie University in 2015 (Austlit, *n.d.*). Bourdieu argues that there is a certain homology, or structural resonances, that exists between fields. In this case, the logics of the literary field that define success in terms of sales figures and aggregated economic capital, have none-the-less been translated into the academic field, where the novels are consecrated as culturally significant.

**Strategy**

In an interview conducted with the author Heiss stated, “I think I’m still the only Aboriginal author that writes commercial fiction, as opposed to literary fiction…which is another debate because it’s all fiction” (2017). Through a critical discussion of genre, this section draws on discussion of Heiss’ second job and distinctive forms of capital to further examine her presentation as an author of popular fiction.

In *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*, Gelder identifies genre as a point of distinction between literature and popular fiction: “Popular fiction announces those identities loudly and unambiguously,” he writes, “you know and need to know immediately that this is romance, or a work of crime fiction (and/or spy fiction), or science fiction, or fantasy, or horror, or a western, or an historical popular novel or an adventure novel” (42). In accordance with an understanding of popular fiction as a product produced for pleasure, Gelder further complicates the understanding of readers of popular fiction as passive and unreflexive: “readers of popular fiction are careful discriminators
of the field and careful readers of the work they process” (36). That is, to write in genre is key to writing a piece of popular fiction and any movement away from an established genre convention can be dangerous for authors relying on its established marketability. In addition to Steiner’s definition of chick lit as “fun, witty, easy and light reads dealing with real issues” (2008, par.33), academic understandings of the genre emphasise the pursuit of a career, love and shopping as constitutive of the genre (Ferriss and Young 2006; Harzewski 2006 and 2011; Merrick 2006; Yardley 2006). Theoretically then, Heiss’ chick lit must strike a balance between the political dimension of her work focused on reclamation and celebration of identity and the focus on consumerism, career and dating essential to the genre of chick lit.

Heiss’ decision to write in the genre of chick lit could be interpreted as a strategic and measured decision when considered in relation to her landmark study on the publishing industry as it relates to Indigenous authors, Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight (2003). In this text she clearly identifies systemic difficulties facing Indigenous authors publishing fiction works focused on Indigenous issues, ideas and themes. Heiss argues that publishing houses often operate on the principle that texts by Indigenous authors do not cohere with the tastes of the reading public. Instead publishers mistakenly assume that works by Indigenous authors are only of interest to Indigenous readers. Because of this assumption, Indigenous authors are not marketed in a way that would break this self-imposed cycle (94). She writes “some publishers claim to have good marketing and
distribution strategies, but admit there are areas that need developing so that the promotion of Aboriginal authors and their works is more rigorous and far-reaching" (90).

Heiss’ criticism centres on the shortcomings of the mechanisms surrounding the promotion of Indigenous writing. In particular, the chapters “Publishing the Indigenous Word” and “Selling Indigenous Literature to the Reader” detail an industry assumption that “the reading public is not interested in works by Aboriginal authors” (90). Heiss relates in detail her decision to self-publish her collection of poetry Token Koori (1998) following the disappointing royalties returned on her first publication, the satirical text Sacred Cows (1996): "If you want your book to be out there, to be read, reviewed and appreciated, and hopefully bring in some of the estimated $3000 income that the average Australian author is supposed to get annually, then you have to do a lot more than just write it" (2003, 96). An awareness of the limitations of the market, potential pitfalls of one’s chosen genre as well as an understanding that non-Indigenous readers will be largely the arbiters of success are highlighted as essential knowledge in the potential production of a highly marketable Indigenous text. Although the reception of texts by Indigenous authors has arguably altered since the publication of Dhuuluu-Yala, what remains significant about Heiss’ text is the way that she demonstrates expert understanding of the publishing industry as it relates to Indigenous authors and her ability to deploy this knowledge to situate herself in a mainstream genre. It is four years after the publication of Dhuuluu-Yala that Heiss then publishes the first of her chick lit novels.
Heiss is attracted to the chick lit genre on the basis that, in her words, “I never saw women like myself in Australian fiction” (Heiss 2017), that is, “an urban, beachside Blackfella, a concerete Koori with Westfield Dreaming” (2012,1). Heiss’ PhD had emphasised the role of literature as a platform for activism and affirmation and celebration of Aboriginal culture. As she extrapolates in an interview in the *Sun Herald*:

I did the stolen generations novel and that’s done really well in schools [The Diary of Mary Tallence], but that was emotionally exhausting. I write lots of articles about Indigenous issues, identity and social justice. But there’s other aspects to our lives as well and I wanted to write something that was funny” (Keenan 2008).

Heiss’ emphasis on lightness and humour coheres with her broader political philosophy of writing, in particular, the way that her writing challenges stereotypes of Indigeneity. She extrapolates:

“The whole point is to say, yes we do have careers in the Indigenous industry, or we teach Indigenous studies or whatever, but we have relationships. We fall in love, we fall out of love, we make love. That’s about being a human being. It’s not about being black and white” (Keenan 2008).

Further, as expressed in an interview with *The Geelong Advertiser*, the genre seemingly allows for a deeper political point to be made:

The whole point is that [Indigenous people] are not this separate society, we work in government departments, we catch the train, we go shopping…We don’t just sit around talking about sovereignty and land rights -- we like clothes, we like shoes, we eat cake (2009).

Heiss also reflects on the way that the genre of chick lit allows her to present previously unrepresented models of female Indigeneity:
I am defined as a choc lit author because I use the genre to write about women I know, the women in my world, women who inspire me, motivate me and are role models to me...these are women who did not appear in contemporary Australian women’s writing until I put them there (2012, 215).

Further, she is aware of a critical understanding of the genre as formulaic and of lower status than other literary genres. Heiss recounts an early critical review of *Not Meeting Mr Right* in which the reviewer, “a middle class white guy” critiqued the novel as “formulaic” (Heiss 2017). She responded to this criticism: “Well yes it is! Chick lit, or lots of writing is formulaic [but] it’s how you use the formula. For me it was how I used the formula to get the message across” (Heiss 2017).

In all of these quotations Heiss discusses genre authoritatively. Her choice to write in the genre of chick lit is articulated in explicitly strategic terms in which genre is conceptualised as a sort of tool that is roughly capable of achieving the distinct but joint aims of market success and dissemination of empowering representations of Aboriginal women. Heiss’ strategising is explicitly reflected in an article published in *The Sun Herald*: “[Heiss] has made no secret of the fact that her foray into chick lit has been partly strategic. It is a conscious attempt to reach an audience that wouldn’t normally engage with Aboriginal issues and to offer an alternative view of what it means to be a contemporary Aboriginal woman” (Fullerton 2010).

Although Heiss does, at times, speak authoritatively about her chosen genre she is not always entirely consistent in her rationalisation of genre as strategic practice. In an interview conducted with the author, for example, Heiss partially attributes the inspiration
for *Not Meeting Mr Right* to reading Georgia Blain’s *Closed for Winter* (1998), Rosie Scott’s *Movie Dreams* (1995) and *Glory Days* (1988) and Linda Jaivin’s works. Reflecting on these novels she states, “I never saw women like myself in Australian fiction…I don’t know where the original idea from; but I had this idea of wanting to do these dates from hell…and that was *Not Meeting Mr Right*” (2017). Although authors such as Linda Jaivin are largely classified as authors of chick lit, Heiss goes on to assert that “I never read chick lit, I didn’t know I was writing chick lit until I met with my publisher at the time” (Heiss 2017). She further states in the same interview, “I’d started my first chick lit novel — which I didn’t know was chick lit” (Heiss 2017). In this interview, Heiss seemingly discusses genre in a less explicitly strategic manner. Genre is inspiration but is not explicitly identifiable. With respect to her first chick lit novel, *Not Meeting Mr Right*, she suggests that the classification of the novel as chick lit only occurred after it was completed and was something that was determined by her publisher. As Heiss explains:

I didn’t know I was writing chick lit, I just wanted to write this story, but [it’s] the sales and marketing departments that determine the genre because they’re the ones who have to go into the bookshops to sell them (Heiss 2017).

Heiss further recounts the significance of certain paratextual elements in establishing the genre for *Not Meeting Mr Right* and its subsequent novels. Genette (1991) argues that a book is much more than “a lengthy sequence of verbal utterances more or less containing meaning” (261). A book’s “para-textual” elements, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface or illustrations are “the means by which a text makes a book of
itself and proposes itself as such to readers” (261). Heiss recalls the process of the design of Not Meeting Mr Right’s book cover and the explicit connection between design and designation of genre. The process of the design involved sending the synopsis and 15 of the year’s bestselling novels in that genre to the designer. She quotes her publisher’s instructions to the designer, “here’s the story, make it look something like that” (Heiss 2017).

As much as Heiss speaks of strategy regarding writing into genre, her account of the writing and then marketing of Not Meeting Mr Right indicates that genre was largely imposed at the level of the marketing of the book. In this case, the cover design provided a strong frame for presenting Not Meeting Mr Right, and its subsequent novels, as chick lit. Heiss expands on this conversation with her publisher: “The women who buy these books know what they are looking for, they’ll go in the shop and they don’t know specifically the title of the author [but] they will look for a book that looks like the one they just read” (Heiss 2017). Although Heiss does at times position the development of Not Meeting Mr Right as strategic, her concession that she “didn’t know [she] was writing chick lit” (Heiss 2017) does highlight the extent to which the publisher’s marketing of the text was a significant factor in determining the genre of the novel. For Not Meeting Mr Right, chick lit was seemingly imputed after the fact.

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31 Genette writes, “The paratext thus is empirically composed of an assorted set of practices and discourses of all sorts and all ages, which I incorporate under this term in the name of a community interest, or convergence of effects, which seems to me more important than their diversity of aspect” (1991, 262).
The apparent inconsistencies between Heiss’ ignorance of chick lit and also the argument that she “uses” the genre, need not be contradictory. Although there is some inconsistency in the way that Heiss discusses chick lit, she is resoundingly consistent in her discussion of the associated genre of commercial women’s fiction:

My strategy in choosing to write commercial women’s fiction is to reach audiences that weren’t previously engaging with Aboriginal Australia in any format, either personally, professionally or subconsciously. And it is that non-Indigenous female market that is key to my audience: let’s face it, there are not enough Blackfellas to sustain any publishing venture, least of all an entire genre. With this in mind, I made a conscious decision to move into the area of commercial women’s fiction, releasing four books in the genre of ‘chick lit’ or, as friends at Koorie Radio 93.7 FM categorized it, ‘choc-lit.’ (2012, 215)

Heiss seems to make a critical distinction between commercial women’s fiction and chick lit. At another point in our interview Heiss discusses genre as a strategic tool. She explains, “I appreciate that genre is about targeting…a particular audience” (Heiss 2017). Heiss explicitly considers commercial women’s fiction as connected to a mainstream audience, a point extended in the interview: “I’d made this conscious decision to reach this broad audience of Australian women who are on the bus or at the beach or in books clubs who may never have read a book by an Aboriginal author before” (Heiss 2017). In Heiss’ discussion, commercial women’s fiction is a vehicle that allows the writer to take a political message to the broadest possible audience:

It’s not about the sales…well, it is about the sale! For every sale someone is reading it, and so I go ‘how do I take a message about black deaths in custody or the NT intervention or cultural appropriation and make it
palatable or relatable in an everyday story for
Australian women to read? (Heiss 2017)

Commercial women’s fiction, thus, in Heiss’ retrospective theorisation is an already
distinguished general category that presents relatable and palatable stories to an audience
of Australian women who read for leisure. It is about targeting a specific reader. The
consolidation then of Heiss’ first novel, Not Meeting Mr Right from commercial women’s
fiction to chick lit appears largely as a refinement and qualification made by the publishing
house for matters of marketing. Heiss articulates the conscious positioning of her second
novel as consolidating the authorial position established by Not Meeting Mr Right: “I went
to do Avoiding Mr Right and chose to set it in Melbourne, because I was very conscious
of markets and audiences” (Heiss 2017). Further, “the first one was about pioneering the
Koori chick-lit genre…so this one [Avoiding Mr Right] was really about wanting to
establish my name in the genre. The market’s flooded with chick stories and I wanted it to
be distinctly different, so it has got indigenous politics etc.” (Keenan 2008). The
publication of Not Meeting Mr Right demonstrated the viability of Heiss’ chick lit. The
subsequent three novels were then developed closely in alignment with this new
designation of genre. Heiss demonstrates an awareness and emphasis on the importance
of genre from the moment she began writing Not Meeting Mr Right. Genre, however,
became a more explicit and coherent strategic measure following the refinement of the
novel as chick lit by her publisher.
Reviews from Newspapers and Literary Journals

The final section of this chapter considers critical reviews of Heiss’ chick lit as a means of considering how her strategic positioning is interpreted and legitimated by cultural intermediaries. Cultural intermediaries are individuals, groups or institutions that broadly mediate between the processes of the production and consumption of cultural products. They may be classified as “taste-makers” in that they contribute to societal understandings of legitimate or consecrated culture.\(^\text{32}\) In the article, “Intellectualization and Art World Development: Film in the United States” (2001), Baumann reviews 468 film reviews over a 65 year period to consider the consolidation of the intellectualisation of film from entertainment to art. Baumann’s study underscores the importance of critics as gatekeepers of legitimate culture as evidenced in the coherence of a specialised film language that expanded into the academic field and consecrated film as art (420). Further, Melinda Harvey and Julieanne Lamond (2016) discuss the significance of book reviewing in *The Australian* and *The Australian Book Review* as directly influencing authors’ careers, books sales and publishers’ within the Australian literary field. As one part of a broader apparatus of artistic consecration, critical reviews of Heiss’ chick lit interpret the strategy discussed throughout this chapter to reflect and qualify her position in the Australian literary field.\(^\text{33}\)

\(^{32}\) In their book, *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (2013), Rehberg Sedo and Fuller put forward the term “cultural mediator” in place of the more porous “culture intermediary.” In their study of mass reading events cultural mediators perform the very literal task of directly facilitating and/or providing the mechanisms through which selected literature is made available to the public.

\(^{33}\) For further discussion of the significance of book reviewing practices in the Australian literary field, see Matthew Ricketson and Sybil Nolan’s (2013) book chapter “Unintended consequences: The impact of structural reform in the newspaper industry on the marketing of books.
Critical reviews of *Not Meeting Mr Right, Avoiding Mr Right, Manhattan Dreaming* and *Paris Dreaming* consistently identify the novels as chick lit and also highlight the political dimensions of the novels as a point of difference in genre. It is a point of emphasis in these reviews that *Not Meeting Mr Right* is the first piece of Aboriginal chick lit (Guivarra 2007; Jaivin 2007; Brunt 2007) Further, reviews largely affirm Heiss’ discussed strategy to produce chick lit novels with a point of distinction. *Not Meeting Mr Right* is described as “[different] from typical chick lit in its ‘Blackfella’ narrator Alice Aigner” (Becerra-Gurley 2007, 187). Further, Kasey Brunt from *The Northern Territory News* writes, “If you are thinking this book sounds like the hundreds of other chick lit titles flooding the market, think again” (2007). In both reviews, the emphasis on Aboriginal politics is identified as what distinguishes the novels from other chick lit.

While all reviews identify *Not Meeting Mr Right* as chick lit and emphasise the substantive nature of the subject matter, there is a division in terms of how well this dimension is perceived to be integrated. In a review for the academic journal *Antipodes*, Nicole Becerra-Gurley (2007) highlights this tension, “Heiss’ emphasis on the female Aboriginal perspective is the most thought provoking aspect of the novel; however, the way in which Heiss presents cultural issues detracts from the plot rather than enhances” (188). Despite this, Becerra-Gurley still concludes that, “Mr Right’s enjoyment factor remains sufficient for reading in the bathtub or while relaxing at the beach” (188). Nancia Guivarra (2007) from *The Koori Mail*, however, identifies these argued moments of
tension as constructive educative moments for the reader, writing “it is a rollicking good read, highly entertaining and for non-indigenous readers in particular it has achieved a good balance of education about the issues indigenous people face daily, with lashings of humour.” This position is shared by Kasey Brunt (2007) writing for the Northern Territory News: “Heiss does tackle the usual issues about racism and identity in Not Meeting Mr Right. But she does it in an engaging — and funny — way.”

These criticisms and acclamations reflect the reception of Heiss’ subsequent chick lit novels. The emphasis on politics as a point of distinction in the genre is discussed as either inconsistent or incompatible with the rest of the story and explicitly didactic, or as successfully integrated and generative of teachable moments. Of Paris Dreaming Lorien Kaye (2011) from The Age writes, “it’s not that I disagree with any of Heiss’ labored points, but her too-obvious agenda gets in the way of the story. And it’s not a particularly gripping one at that.” Anne Fullerton (2010) from The Sun-Herald reflects more favourably on Manhattan Dreaming: “the sub-genre of Australian indigenous chick lit was virtually invented by Heiss and, in providing a more nuanced, accessible vision of Aboriginal identity, she has addressed a glaring absence from the literary landscape. The flipside of this is that the mechanics of the book are sometimes transparent and the novel’s cultural education elements don’t always blend easily with the narrative.” Fullerton further extrapolates on the significance of Heiss’ protagonists:

While the plot is somewhat formulaic, what Heiss brings anew to the genre are her observations on issues facing contemporary Aboriginal women…these
observations provide glimpses of a smart, analytical protagonist that are not always at ease against a background of shopping, confectionary and kitchen sex.

Critical reviews of Heiss largely reflect Heiss’ own discussion of her strategic authorial practice as her novels are largely identified as chick lit with a point of difference. These reviews imply a diverse and differentiated reading public inclusive of Aboriginal and settler Australians. Chapter Three will extend this discussion to incorporate academic understandings of the genre.
III. The Page: Genre, Formula and a Turn to the Reader

In this chapter I attend to formal scholarship on genre as another institutional mechanism of literary legitimation and consecration. Scholarship on chick lit seeks to address the marginalisation of the genre by arguing for its importance as a source of socio-cultural commentary. Analysis is largely conducted through ideological reading of the novels and discussion of adherence or deviation from a formulaic understanding of chick lit. In this chapter I uphold the importance of an ideological approach to reading chick lit and present a Bourdieusian inspired sociological reading of Heiss’ novels focused on her depiction of a nascent Aboriginal middle-class. However, I argue that a strictly ideological approach is not sufficient to capture the complexity of these novels. Through a comprehensive review of scholarship on chick lit I explore how an ideological approach supplemented by a formulaic understanding of genre casts novels by women of colour as either deviations or subversions of the prototypical or traditional chick lit novel. Invariably, the racial politics of these novels are discussed as incommensurate with the genre. Through a consideration of Anne Brewster’s interpretation of Martin Nakata’s theory of “the cultural interface,” and an understanding of genre as a “fuzzy” and “historically contingent” organisational practice (Frow 2006, 80), I propose a reader response approach as a way of circumventing some of the limitations of contemporary scholarship on chick lit.
Definition, Origin and Significance of Chick Lit

Academic and industry understandings of the genre present the pursuit of a career, love and shopping as uniformly constitutive of chick lit. That is, through first person narration, an urban-based woman heavily invested in consumer culture “comes of age” or “consciousness” through episodes of dating (Yardley 2006, 4). Since its inception — heralded by the publication of Bridget Jones’s Diary (1996) — the genre has been lambasted for its frivolity and superficiality. In 2001, Booker Prize nominee Beryl Bainbridge denounced the genre as “a froth sort of thing” concerned with “helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight and so on” (quoted in Ferrisss and Young 2006, 1).

A lack of profundity or originality is a common critique, and the title of chick lit has become so offensive to some that anthologies have even been compiled in opposition to the term. This is Not Chick Lit (2006) edited by Elizabeth Merrick is a compilation of women’s short fiction, that is emphatically not chick lit. Merrick defines the genre in the following terms:

Chick lit is a genre, like a thriller, the sci-fi novel, or the fantasy epic. Its form and content are, more or less formulaic: white girl in the big city searches for Prince Charming, all the while, shopping, alternately cheating on or adhering to her diet, dodging her boss, and enjoying the occasional teary-eyed lunch with her token Sassy Gay friend (vii, 2006).

Merrick and Bainbridge dismiss the genre of chick lit on the grounds of its supposed frivolity and superficiality. A modest number of advocates, however, refute this and argue for the substantive nature of these texts. From an industry perspective, author
Meg Chabot defines chick lit as “a form of women’s fiction, on the basis of subject matter, character, audience and narrative style” (quoted in Ferriss and Young 2006, 3). Simply put, Chabot argues that chick lit features single women in their 20s and 30s “navigating their generation’s challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships” (3). Definitions of this nature prompt critics to draw parallels between chick lit and the historical novel of manners.

Novels such as Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) are argued to be a precursor to the genre owing to their interrogation of societal norms, focus on marriage and partnering, and wry witty humour (Ferriss and Young 2006, 5). Other feminist scholars have cautioned against superficial criticism which dismisses the texts on the basis of their affiliation with consumer culture; an argument, they point out, that dates back to the very beginning of female authorship.34 Stephanie Harzewski (2006), a dominant force in chick lit scholarship, outlines the genre’s significance:

Chick lit…responds to upheavals in the dating and mating order through a mixed strategy of dramatization, farce and satire. Daughters of educated baby boomers, chick lit heroines, in their degree of sexual autonomy and professional choices stand as direct beneficiaries of the women’s liberation movement. Yet they shift earlier feminist agendas, such as equal pay for equal work, to lifestyle concerns. Unlike earlier generations, chick protagonists and their readers have the right to choose; now the problem is too many choices (37).

34 For further discussion on this, see Stephanie Harzewski’s book chapter “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners” (2006).
That is, chick lit represents contemporary gender politics post women’s liberation exemplified by the paradoxical tyranny and freedom of choice. As expressed by Harzewski, however, these texts are not didactic. Instead, they are seen to reflect the complexities of contemporary of life as women seek to reconcile competing demands for autonomy and recognition in the workplace and the desire for monogamous and fulfilling personal relationships. On this topic, Ferriss and Young argue for a sense of “authenticity” (2006, 4) implicit in this new form. Unlike the high romance novels that preceded it, chick lit has aspirations to reflect the lived reality of modern urban women (2006, 4). Authenticity is associated with the confessional form expressed through the use of letters and emails that craft the impression that the protagonist is speaking directly to its readers (2006, 4). As argued by Nora Séllei, this assists in the identification of the reader with the protagonist that is a key factor in the genre’s success (175).

*Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) is widely accepted to have pioneered the genre. The novel’s success is largely attributed to Bridget’s self-effacing, wry and witty commentary as expressed through the intimate and confessional form of diary entries. In this form, Bridget externalized the anxieties of first world womanhood that is characterized by an obsession with weight, alcohol and men. *Bridget Jones’ Diary* inspired a prolific number of copycat novels that, in the words of Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff (2006), “centred on the life of a thirty-something female who was unhappily single, appealingly neurotic, and preoccupied with the shape, size and look of her body, and with finding a
man” (89). The novel was significant not only for its articulation of a new fictional style, but also for its expression of a distinctively post-feminist sensibility (489). Post-feminism is characterised by an emphasis on personal choice exercised through consumerism and commodification. They argue:

Chick lit articulates a distinctively post-feminist sensibility characterized by an emphasis on neo-liberal feminine subjectivities and self-surveillance and monitoring; the notion of the (sexual) body as the key source of identity for women; discourses of boldness, entitlement, and choice (usually articulated to normative femininity and/or consumerism); and a belief in the emotional separateness of men’s and women’s worlds. It is also characterised by an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist discourses (2006,1).

Post-feminist politics, as expressed in chick lit, is marked unambiguously by a sense of contradiction and inconsistency. Consequently, this hypocrisy, ambiguity and confusion operates as an implicit commentary on the gains and deficiencies of second wave feminism (Harzewski 2011, 2). Earlier commentary on chick lit, that was largely invested in ascertaining or dismissing the feminist credentials of these texts, has been replaced by the more general understanding that these texts are significant as reflections of these shifting gender politics (see Harzewski 2011). Scholarship on the area stresses the significance of these texts as cultural products that further illuminate the reality of late capitalism and the way that the commercial has infiltrated the personal. The contradiction and inconsistencies of the protagonist’s politics are, therefore, reflections of this complexity. These women are neo-liberal subjects, invested with the politics of choice but seemingly curtailed by the same system that emancipates them.
Chick Lit and Race: Room for Difference?

As discussed earlier, chick lit features and is marketed to attract single, urban-based, white women in their 20s and 30s (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006, 1). Despite this, there now exists a diversity of what are described as chick lit sub-genres that encapsulate the experience of women of different nationalities, ethnicities and religious affiliations. Today, you can buy chick lit jnr, mommy lit, lady lit, church lit amongst many others. Of particular interest is the development of the racially and culturally specific genres of sistah lit and chica lit in America.

In her article “Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves: Chick Lit in Black and White” (2006) Lisa Guerrero analyses the distinction between chick lit and sistah lit, a subgenre of the form that portrays African American protagonists. Guerrero argues for a critical distinction between the two forms. Sistah lit is distinct in that its protagonists must fight racial as well as gendered barriers in their search for self-actualization. Where the women of chick lit are characterised by monogamous coupling and the promise of domesticity, the women of sistah lit — informed by a history that connected African American female identity to histories of forced compliance with the roles of caretaker, breeder and sexualized object — reject this containment within a domestic setting (90). Guerrero references Terry McMillan’s novel Waiting to Exhale (1992) as an earlier incarnation that

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35 For further discussion of chick lit and sub-genres, see Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young’s book Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction (2006)
preceded the development of the genre, and influenced later authors such as Pearl Cleage and April Sinclair who write about American cultural specificities and current social challenges facing the African American community.

Ferriss and Young, however, argue that more recent black chick lit or sistah lit lacks the political fervour of McMillan’s work. They write, “the novels studiously avoid references to racial inequality or specifically black problems or concerns” (2006, 8). More recent black chick lit is thereby deemed to owe more to Sex and the City than Waiting to Exhale. This position is similarly expressed in the New York Times article by Lola Ogunnaike, “Black Writers Seize Glamorous Ground Around Chick Lit” (2004). Published two years earlier, Ogunnaike argues that more recent black chick lit tends to be neither racially charged nor didactic: “The protagonists, educated and decidedly middle to upper class, effortlessly mingle with both black and white characters. Love, not privilege, is the only real speed bump.” It is further argued that novels such as The Accidental Diva (2001), Bling (2004), Gotham Diaries (2004) and FAB: A Novel (2006), feature protagonists not struggling with being “black” but only with their fabulous careers. In her article “Chicanas and ‘Chick Lit’: Contested Latinidad in the Novels of Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez” (2010), Amanda Maria Morrison similarly questions the problematic representation of the latinidad woman in Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez’s literature and reaches a similar conclusion to Ferriss and Young. The Dirty Girls Social Club (2003), written by Valdes-Rodriguez, was the first novel by a Latina author to debut on the New
*York Times* best seller list and is considered to be the originator of the sub-genre of chicana chick lit. The novel features the friendship of Latin American women who have different racial backgrounds but find common ground due to their mutual Latina heritage. Morrison argues that although superficially the novel appears to affirm the identities and culture of Latin American women, the women are only united around a bourgeois sensibility characteristic of chick lit — focused on career aspirations, body consciousness and conspicuous consumption — which bears no correlation to the particularity of their Latin American identities. In fact, Morrison argues these women disavow their identity in pursuit of this ideal.

Sub-genres of chick lit, especially those attendant to issues of race and identity such as sistah lit and chica lit, cannot be discussed as homogenous wholes. Each sub-genre is respectively characterised by racial and cultural specificities and histories. In discussing these sub-genres, I do not intend to collapse the differences between the two, thereby designating perhaps some kind of “minority” chick lit. What is significant in the critiques of Ferriss and Young (2006), Morrison (2010), and Ogunnaike (2004), however, is the shared emphasis on the exclusion of racial politics from recent expressions of these genres. The question they cumulatively pose is where does race feature in contemporary chick lit? Such an observation does not seek to reduce the identity of the author to that singularly of race or ethnicity; we should ask in equal measure why a focus on race should be considered a missing component of these novels at all? Or in the case of Morrison’s
critique of Valdez-Rodriguez, what would it mean to produce a more “authentic” representation of Latin American women? Tia Williams provides some insight when discussing her novel, *The Accidental Diva* (2001): “Recent black fiction has been full of whiny, suffering-from-hair-politics, my-man-done-me-wrong women. Sounds pat, but many people still think you need to be downtrodden to be truly black” (quoted in Ogunnaike 2004). Williams, therefore, situates her novel as expressive of new formations of “black” female subjectivities in American literature in opposition to racial stereotypes. Despite the language of Ferriss and Young (2006), Morrison (2010) and Ogunnaike (2004), race has always been a component of chick lit. For example, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* details the life of a 30 something year old white British woman and although the text has been largely read with relation to emergent post-feminist female subjectivities, it is equally a narrative about what it means to be a young, white woman in Britain. The criticisms presented by the Ferriss and Young, Ogunnaike, and Morrison emphasise that that protagonists of sistah lit and chica lit do not discuss their racial or ethnic identities in any explicit terms; race remains a large component of the literature, however, it is sublimated with respect to other formative aspects of identity. Cumulatively, these critics express the idea that the overarching politics of the genre, primarily the investment in consumerism, overrides and sublimates the politics attendant to race and cultural specificity.
In scholarship, attendance to these elements pursues the question, “what does race and cultural specificity do to the genre?” The conclusions drawn are largely pessimistic and ultimately problematic. Perhaps, this is the wrong question to ask. A more productive approach may be to consider the articulation of distinct feminisms as expressed by diverse cultural and racial groups, thereby acknowledging the intersectionality of race and gender. In their article “Manolos, Marriage and Mantras: Chick Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism” (2008), Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai highlight the limitations of contemporary scholarship on chick lit. Although this article was published prior to the consolidation of chick lit scholarship as an identifiable field, their contention that race remains a largely under-theorised element of the genre is still relevant. Butler and Desai argue that scholarship focuses on gender and sexuality around the nexus of personal choice. The absence of consideration of race reinforces the white woman as the genre’s protagonist and subsequently has produced criticism that reductively reads women of colour as either identical to or a derivative of this assumed norm (4). This approach erases difference and does not acknowledge distinctions in different articulations of feminism. Butler and Desai supplant a focus on post-feminism with that of neoliberal feminism, thereby, drawing attention to broader structural inequalities omitted from the former. Whiteness, empire and nationalism are at the centre of neo-liberal and liberal ideology.

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and, thus, provide a more productive and intersectional space to explore the complexities of these novels. Contrary to scholarship that identifies the problematic contradictory and paradoxical politics of the genre — an argument synonymous with post-feminism — Butler and Desai argue that their chosen novels of analysis are keenly aware of the problematics of neo-liberalism. In fact, protagonists of these novels employ these logics to produce “potential spaces of resistance” in which identity can be re-imagined (9).

More recently, Harzewski (2011) has encouraged further scholarship on non-Western focused chick lit (17). Five years on, this area of scholarship still remains underdeveloped. Instead, what has emerged is the argument for the “proto-typical” (Montoro 2012, 17) or “traditional” (Mathew 2016a, 1) articulations of the genre, that are defined by white protagonists. As argued by Butler and Desai this recasts non-white chick lit as derivative of, or as I argue, a deviation, transformation or subversion of the prototypical or traditional genre formation.

Other scholars emphasise the “plasticity” of the genre (Ferriss and Young 2006, 7; Mathew 2016a, 1) as an affirmation of the genre’s progressive potential, however, such understandings are complicated by a desire to produce or identify a taxonomy of the genre that again reifies these novels as different. As raised by Cecilia Konchar Farr (2009) in her article “It Was Chick Lit All Along: The Gendering of a Genre,” this is most visibly demonstrated in the exclusion of Terry McMillan’s Waiting to Exhale (1992) from the
category of chick lit. Despite displaying many of the constitutive elements of the genre, the novel is bypassed for *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, and is instead only discussed as its precursor. This continues what Farr describes as “the regrettable move to ‘whiten’ a tradition when we want to subject it to scholarly analysis” (203). Farr argues that this is largely the result of connecting the genre to canonical classics that are argued to be early examples of the genre. Consistently, various scholars retroactively identity *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) as chick lit (Séllei 2006; Harzewski 2011). This tradition operates to legitimate the genre as serious literature. The argument for merit is further expressed in the desire to identify the feminist credentials of the genre within the context of second wave feminism. While some critics identify the genre as progressive (Benstock 2006; Mabry 2013) it is more common to see ambiguous conclusions drawn (Roslanind and Herdeckierhoff 2006; Rowntree 2012; Umminger 2006). As Farr argues, positioning the analysis of chick lit exclusively around ideological analysis significantly limits the possibilities of interpretation. This approach has produced overwhelmingly negative or ambiguous conclusions that further marginalise the genre and recast it in accordance with popular opinion as trivial and problematic. As expressed by Farr, “with this dominant approach to chick lit, consumerism reinforces sexism, and the take home message of the novels, the critics conclude, is that to buy things, to fix yourself, if you are lucky you will be rewarded with romance” (2009, 204).
A Tradition Continued: Scholarship on Heiss

A similar approach is evident in the small body of scholarship written on the subject of the chick lit of Anita Heiss. In the article “The Pretty and the Political Didn’t Seem to Blend Well: Anita Heiss’ Chick Lit and the Destabilisation of a Genre” (2016a), Imogen Mathew argues that *Not Meeting Mr Right* destabilises the genre of chick lit. An argument for destabilisation implies that there is first a stable expression of the genre. Although Mathew does not explicitly identify this, she does argue that there is a traditional articulation of the genre: “The chick lit genre is hetero-normative, white, and middleclass; traditional gender binaries are taken seriously and living the big city, consumer culture dream shapes the narrative arc” (1). By foregrounding “a non-Western, non-white subjectivity” (1) Heiss is argued to be participating in an act of “subversion” and “resistance” (3). Despite this identification, Mathew’s argument remains centred on the perceived identification of destabilisation. According to Mathew, destabilisation means that Heiss’ attention to racial politics in the novel intensifies its hetero-normativity. She writes, “by altering one variable, other features of the genre take on a sharper (and in this case, more conservative and more humorous) cast” (6).

Wenche Ommundsen (2011), author of the article “Sex and the Global City: Chick Lit with a Difference,” argues in accordance with the aforementioned critics on race and chick lit (Ferriss and Young 2006; Morrison 2010; Oggunaike 2004), that Heiss’ politics are “blunted” (2011,119) by the genre convention of chick lit itself. Ommundsen’s article
is significant in that she applies a transnational framework to focus on the diversity of and
different articulations of cosmopolitanisms in chick lit novels from China, Saudi Arabia,
and Australia.\textsuperscript{37} Despite this, Ommundsen’s analysis still recasts chick lit that features a
non-white protagonist as coming up short.\textsuperscript{38} Heiss’ main point, she argues, is to defy
stereotypes, including that of the angry activist. Her books suggest that it is possible to be
committed to Aboriginal politics without forgoing the pleasures of romance and consumer
culture. She writes, “it is a message to which her target readership — presumably less
accustomed to, and less tolerant of, a more activist style of writing — is likely to be
receptive. But it does blunt her politics, reducing debates about both race and gender to
relatively ‘safe’ issues related to lifestyle and identity” (119).

Demonstrated in the analyses of Mathew and Ommundsen is a conception of
genre that accords greater power to the implicit formula of genre rather than the author
herself. Indeed, Mathew’s conclusion that “using the chick lit genre to promulgate an
explicitly political message is, perhaps inevitably, an exercise in compromise” (2016a, 9)
coheres with broader criticism that suggests the genre is incapable of incorporating politics
distinct from the “traditional” articulation of the genre (Ferriss and Young 2006; Morrison
2010; Ogunnaike 2004). Perhaps because the identity of Heiss’ protagonists resists a
reading focused exclusively around second wave feminism, scholarship focused on her

\textsuperscript{37} This includes: People’s Republic of Desire (2006) by Annie Wang, Girls of Riyadh (2007) by Rajaa al-
Sanea and Anita Heiss’ Not Meeting Mr Right and Avoiding Mr Right.
\textsuperscript{38} Ommundsen’s definition of the genre is significantly less rigid than other scholars in that her chosen texts
for analyse, resemble or are “modelled” (107) on Candace Bushnell’s Sex and the City (1999).
novels reveals some inconsistencies regarding the relationship of the genre convention of chick lit to her novels. For example, Mathew primarily argues that Heiss “destabilises” the genre, but then also that she “appropriates it” (2016a, 1). Further, she suggests that the genre “suggests a plasticity” (2016a, 1) that can incorporate non-white protagonists, but that alteration in the genre’s variables reproduces its conservatism. In this case, Mathew argues that *Not Meeting Mr Right* presents a subtle undercurrent of homophobia that is largely the product of alteration in the genre’s variables. Cumulatively, these scholars suggest that deviation from the perceived formula results in a profoundly problematic text. The author ultimately remains entirely constrained by the perceived limits of the genre. As expressed by Ommundsen (2011), “the perfect marriage of politics and consumer culture may be as difficult to achieve as any marriage her lovesick heroes dream of” (118).

**Ideological Analysis and Mapping of Heiss’ Chick Lit**

Despite the limitations of a purely ideological reading of chick lit, this form of analysis remains significant. This next section conducts an ideological analysis of Heiss’ chick lit that is inspired by the form of analysis conducted by Bourdieu in *The Field of Cultural Production*. Bourdieu’s approach, premised on mapping the protagonist’s social space, lends itself to the kinds of intersectional approach encouraged by Butler and Desai (2008). As they argue, women of colour chick lit sub-genres “tell stories about young women’s undivided empowerment, but the character’s engagements with feminism and gender are
often articulated through the questions of race, nation, ethnicity and class” (4). In Bourdieu’s reading of *A Sentimental Education*, he identifies a “generative model” (1993, 149) that animates the protagonist’s behaviour based on an internal logics of relations of class power and intellectual capital. Broadly, Heiss’ novels are animated by class relations. Her protagonists are depictions of an emergent Aboriginal middle-class whose career and dating aspirations are inclusive of the nexus of gender and race. This section redresses some of the limitations identified in contemporary chick lit scholarship and introduces a reader-response based approach as a way of complementing an ideological analysis.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000) and Marcia Langton (1993) provide a framework for exploring the intersection of race and gender in the Australian context. In her seminal study, *Talkin’ up to the White Woman: Aboriginal Women and Feminism* (2000), Moreton-Robinson unpacks the complicity of Australian feminism in the historical and continuing dispossession of Aboriginal women and people. White women enjoy a racist privilege that is based on colonisation. Central to Australian feminism is the double prong of whiteness and nationality, both of which remain under-theorised and operate as an invisible norm. For Moreton-Robinson, “whiteness” is both construct and reality: “whiteness as race, as privilege and as a social construction is not interrogated as a difference within feminist political practice and theory” (xviii). Thus, feminist practice or analysis that does not interrogate this remains arguably complicit in the structures that perpetuate Aboriginal
dispossession. The intersectional history of race and gender in Australia is also theorised by Marcia Langton (1993) who argues for the foundational importance of applying intersectional theoretical approaches to Aboriginal artists: “without theories of race and gender, which are historically and culturally relevant to Aboriginal people and white Australia, we cannot interpret our artists” (1993, 45). Ideological analysis bolstered by post-feminist critique precludes adequate analysis of these intersectional dimensions and produces readings that focus on the problematics of Heiss’ literature. Heiss writes with uncompromising directness, which read within an Australian, rather than global context, is hardly “safe” (Ommundsen 2011, 119). It is interesting to note that chick lit scholars invested in articulations of race in the genre, have not yet demonstrated willingness to acknowledge the complexity of race and racial discourse in chick lit with the same openness with which they consider second wave feminism. As noted earlier in this paper, paradoxical tyranny and freedom of choice characterise the post-feminist politics of chick lit. An emphasis on career aspiration, dating and conspicuous consumption can, of course, align with explicit racial politics. Perhaps what is most striking about the women of Heiss’ literature is their uniform commitment to producing change contingent on operating within existent structures. That is, they reject — or are not interested in — systemic change. The protagonists of Heiss’ chick lit are embedded in the politics of neo-liberalism, they are explicit consumers and in a sense are the beneficiaries, at least economically, of existing economic structures. It does not appear
to be in their immediate personal interest to challenge this. They are, however, interested in social or political change. For these women, change means challenging negative racial stereotypes or reductive conceptions of Aboriginality through the fields of education, politics and the arts. Reflecting the genre’s commitment to engaging in the complexity of modern womanhood through post-feminist discourse, Heiss’ literature also encapsulates the added complexities of race. Contrary to critics that interpret the genre as not entirely compatible with racial politics (Ferriss and Young 2006; Morrison 2010; Ogunnaike 2004), Heiss’ protagonists both affirm and celebrate their cultural identities.

Bell Hook’s book *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000) explores the intrinsic link between class and race in African American communities. Not dissimilar to Moreton-Robinson, Hooks weaves personal experience with analysis to unpack how class segregation is built on a history of extended dispossession of racialised groups. Class analysis, she argues, is often omitted from discussion of race — but the two are intrinsically tied. In many respects, Heiss’ books are involved in the project of writing race through the depiction of what has been come to be referred to as the “emergent Aboriginal middle-class” (Langton 2012). In the article “Who’s Afraid of the Black Middle Class” (2016), Timmah Ball reflects on some of the “contradictions” of being an Aboriginal middle-class woman. Drawing on the work of Aboriginal academic Bronwyn Carlsen, Ball notes the widening gap between Indigenous Australians and how her class position has the dual effect of invoking feelings of “shame” and “anxiety” and also “erasing
Aboriginality” completely. Ball’s internal conflict is partially theorised by Ludlow (2016), who describes a “double bind” in which Indigenous identity that defies racist stereotypes is treated suspiciously, or as “inauthentic.” As he writes, “the more modern or global Indigeneity is seen as being, the more its authenticity as an identity is questioned” (2). Drawing on the work of Gregory Bateson, he further explores the perceived contradictions and tension of claims to Indigeneity within settler colonial states, “in which no matter what a person does, he can’t win” (quoted in Ludlow 2016, 2). The complexity of modern Aboriginal identity is further captured in the term, “the soft bigotry of low expectations,” a term attributed to conservative American columnist Michael Gerson, but also theorised by Marcia Langton and Noel Pearson. This term explains suspicion and distrust of Indigenous Australians who do not adhere to deficit understanding of Indigeneity, and how this perception is instrumental in keeping Aboriginal people within a cycle of poverty (see Langton 2012; Pearson 2016).

The protagonists of Heiss’ chick lit have all achieved rapid social mobility and are identifiable as newly consecrated members of the middle-class. All four woman are university educated: Lauren has a Masters degree specialising in the appeal of Aboriginal art in an international market (2010, 49), Libby has a degree from the University of Melbourne, and Peta and Alice both received a Bachelor of Education from Sydney’s University of Technology. Education provides the mechanism through which the protagonists are elevated to what Langton describes as “an emergent Aboriginal middle
class” (2012), a relatively recent social phenomenon in which Aboriginal Australians have achieved “radical social uplift through accumulation of social and human capital in the space of one, but no more than three generations” (2012). These protagonists have reputable and established careers in the arts, politics and education and hold firm aspirations to further their positions in their respective fields. Alice Aigner (Not Meeting Mr Right) is the Head of the History Department at St. Christina’s College, a Catholic school. She is the first woman to be appointed to the head of this department (68) and has aspirations to be principal of St. Christina’s (79). Lauren (Manhattan Dreaming) is an up-and-coming curator at the National Aboriginal Gallery Canberra who aspires to become its director. Libby (Paris Dreaming) also works at the National Aboriginal Gallery as program manager, but has ambitions to one day become an Ambassador for the Arts. Finally, Peta Tully (Avoiding Mr Right) is the National Aboriginal Policy Manager of Media, Sports, Arts, Refugees and Indigenous Affairs with an ambition to eventually become the Minister for Cultural Affairs.

The protagonists’ careers are a radical elevation from their respective families’ class status. Lauren and Alice are the first of their family to attend university, which is also largely implied for both Peta and Libby. Further, Lauren and Peta both hail from remote country towns and Alice’s parents were both blue collar workers. Despite their close connections with their families, the social mobility achieved by this “emergent middle-class,” is received suspiciously by both family and friends and they are
colloquially deemed “Bourgeois Blak” (2011, 43). Heiss caustically critiques broader perceptions of Aboriginal disadvantage. As spoken by Alice in *Avoiding Mr Right*, “I was a bourgeois black, and so was Peta. It wasn’t hard to be in the Aboriginal community - you just had to have a job and own your own car and you were regarded as middle class” (2008, 237). Owing to their accumulated cultural and social capital, some of these women experience a degree of estrangement from their family. Lauren describes herself as a “boganist” (2010, 81), who is more interested in the “Big Apple” than the “Big Banana” or “Big Avocado” (2010, 61).

As Langton reminds us in the 2012 *Bower Lecture Series*, “Counting Our Victories: The End of Garvey-Ism and the Soft Bigotry of Low Expectation,” however, social mobility does not equate with a capitulation to assimilationist politics. Although Heiss’ protagonists all work in government-related industry, these women inhabit positions of authority across a number of fields: the arts, politics and education; and they leverage these positions to influence social and political change.

Each of Heiss’ novels is expressly concerned with distinct political debates and concerns framed by distinct societal fields. *Not Meeting Mr Right* positions protagonist Alice within the field of education and features a complication of constructions of Aboriginality and Australian history. *Avoiding Mr Right* takes place within the field of politics and there is a focus on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the institutionalization and exploitation of Aboriginality within academia. *Manhattan Dreaming* and *Paris*
Dreaming both take place within the field of cultural production and there is an emphasis on the recognition of Indigenous artists and artwork as deconstructing reductive and stereotypical understandings of Aboriginality.

As mentioned, Alice in Not Meeting Mr Right is the first Indigenous and first female Head of the History Department at St. Christina’s College. Alice uses her position to correct the way Aboriginal people have been historicised. For example, in discussion of the extension of voting rights to women in Australia, a student points out that this was not the case for Indigenous women. Alice remarks “in a class with only one Koori girl, Kerry, it was actually a non-Koori student, Bernardine, who had picked up on this fact. It made me proud” (2007, 67). While Alice’s job allows her to instil in her students the significance of challenging or being critical of historical representations of Indigenous Australians, she considers herself to be a “champagne socialist” (295). In a dating ad she elucidates: “I like reading historical novels, I literally live at the beach, have done a wine appreciation course and am tertiary educated. I am a champagne socialist with a sense of justice” (295). That is, like the other protagonists of Heiss’ literature, Alice is not interested in systemic change; rather in producing change within existing structures.

In Avoiding Mr Right, Peta Tully relocates from Sydney to Melbourne to pursue her career aspiration of one day becoming Minister of Cultural Affairs. During her time in Melbourne she has a strong career goal: “I’m completely committed to doing my job
the best I can and making my way up the departmental ladder, which means I can’t have any distractions” (67). Her work is inextricably linked with her identity, and her passion for advancing the cause of Indigenous Australians is both personal and career oriented. In conversation with a colleague, frustrated by his ignorance over Indigenous affairs, she says: “The issues I’m talking about are important to me, and not just because of my work. This is who I am. Do you understand that?” (161). Her career allows Peta to enact “change,” and her commitment to change intensifies over the course of the novel. In the opening pages she states: “I’ve only ever wanted to enjoy my life, make some social change where I could through Indigenous education or whatever, and then, oh, I don’t know, maybe one day settle down, when there’s nothing else to do” (6). Peta is disinterested in more conventional female roles: “I want to be out there doing it, making social change, not changing nappies” (5). Further she views marriage as something that would only impede her quality of life: “I had always seen marriage as a threat to my independence, my individuality and my ability to party” (20). She comes to recognise more fully the significance and importance of her career as a force for change:

And at the moment I knew that working in policy was what I wanted to be doing with my life. Marriage and kids seriously had to wait. I had a different purpose for the next few years and that was to educate those who worked with Aboriginal people as part of their lives (192).

In Heiss’ literature the visual arts are emphasised as a powerful means of deconstructing and complicating reductive conceptions of Indigeneity as well as
celebrating indigenous culture. Both Libby in *Paris Dreaming* and Lauren in *Manhattan Dreaming* are curators and their engagement in the arts is about celebration and continuance of Indigenous culture and educating non-indigenous people on Indigenous culture. In describing her presentation on the National Aboriginal Gallery of Victoria to a visiting group of Indigenous curators from Canada, Lauren says “I was proud to talk about the gallery and the role we played in maintaining Aboriginal culture, and now showcasing it to the world” (167). Lauren’s sentiments encapsulate the politics of Heiss’ literature more generally; her work simultaneously both affirms and celebrates Indigenous culture and potentially educates and exposes non-indigenous peoples to Indigenous culture and affairs. A substantial number of Indigenous artists are mentioned across the two books. Heiss does not mention an artist without qualifying their medium, politics and significance. While visual artists represent the majority of the Indigenous artists mentioned, Heiss also acknowledges the importance of Indigenous musicians, activists and warriors, filmmakers and to a lesser extent, authors. Indigenous artists mentioned in *Manhattan Dreaming* include: Gordon Hookey, Jenny Fraser, Christian Thompson, rea, Adam Hill, Elaine Russell, Julie Dowling, Wayne Quilliam, Karen Mills, Judy Watson, Ricky Maynard, Lin Onus, Destiny Deacon, and Darell Sibasado. Each of these artists is discussed in relation to a specific piece of their work. The following artists are mentioned in *Paris Dreaming*: Paddy Nyunkuny Bedford, Tommy Watson, Lena Nyadbi, John Mawurndjul, Gulumbu Yunupingu, Ningura Napurrula, Judy Watson, Michael Riley,
Tony Albert, George Nona, Roy Kennedy, Margaret Ross, Emily McDaniel, Michael McDaniel, Vernon Ah Kee, Merril Bray, Zane Saunders and Andrea Fisher. For such short novels this is an impressive number of Indigenous artists, and this does not include further references to specific Indigenous activists, warriors, authors, musicians, filmmakers and curators.

Another salient aspect of all these novels is the way they interrogate race relations within Australia and abroad. Heiss foregrounds the politics of race by placing her protagonists in conversation with individuals who represent explicit political positions. This means that Heiss can engage in the complexities of the chosen issue by giving voice to the dissenting side but ultimately revealing the limitations, naivety or ignorance of their positions. Although there are many examples of this technique in her literature, there are four primary characters that exemplify this technique: Simple Simon from *Not Meeting Mr Right*, who believes that Aboriginality is a matter of genetics and Mike the Cop from *Avoiding Mr Right* who represents a position unsympathetic to the issue of Aboriginal deaths in custody.

These characters represent conservative, naïve or racist political positions that are comprehensively addressed and complicated by the respective female protagonists of each novel. In Heiss’ literature these characters can represent politics that are capable of reform and address. For example, Mike the Cop remains a central character in *Avoiding Mr Right*, after adopting a more progressive attitude towards deaths in custody in a case reminiscent
of the 2004 Palm Island death in custody.\textsuperscript{39} On his first date with Peta, Mike the Cop wears a charity band in support of the offending officer and argues that he supports “due process” (144). I could truncate the response given by protagonist Peta, but I feel that it is significant to capture the ferocity and eloquence of her response in full:

Due process? What due process? ...The Queensland Director of Public Prosecutions was given a coroner’s report that clearly showed that a Black man died at the hands of a white policeman, but she refused to charge him, and only after a national outrage was there a special inquiry that led to charges being laid. Never at any time was the DPP’s job under threat, though…But at the other end of the spectrum, we had a Black man who spat at a cop on Redfern station - spat, not maimed, or stabbed or killed, just spat at a cop- and he was arrested immediately. When he went to court and the magistrate let him off, the bloody New South Wales Police Minister stepped in and the magistrate’s job was under review immediately. So we have a policing and legal system that says its worse for a Black man to spit at a white cop than it is for a white cop to kill a Black man and that’s your fucken ‘process’? (145).

Subsequently, Mike the Cop, reformed by Peta, removes his support for the offending policeman and ultimately emerges as Peta’s love interest for the novel.

Simple Simon is one of the less eligible bachelors featured in Not Meeting Mr Right. Simon, it emerges, has recently discovered that he has distant Aboriginal heritage; has proclaimed his newfound identity and is keen that Alice, as a proud and strong Wiradjuri woman, authenticate and validate his Aboriginality. In her interaction with Simon, Alice communicates the problematics of predicing understandings of

\textsuperscript{39} In this case a Palm Island resident, Cameron Doomadgee, died in a police cell and his death led to civic disturbances on the island and a legal, political and media sensation that continued for three years. Sensationally, the director of public prosecutions acquitted Chris Hurley of Doomadgee’s death.
Aboriginality based purely on genetic ancestry. Rather forcefully, she confides to the reader, “Aboriginality is spiritual, and it’s a lived experience not something you find by accident and attach its name to yourself. I’m sick of white people deciding they’re black so they have some sense of belonging, or worse still, so they can exploit our culture” (2007, 165). These are only two examples; but they demonstrate a significant strain in Heiss’ literature: political views that are worthy of and necessitate engagement, and ignorant positions that do not.

As encouraged by Butler and Desai (2008), Harzewski (2006), and Farr (2009), this analysis supplants a focus on post-feminist critique for a focus on the intersections of class, race and gender. Heiss’ representation of the Aboriginal middle-class is a significant form of socio-cultural commentary. Nonetheless, such an approach only partially accounts for the broader social significance of these novels, and still partly performs the function of defending or valorising the identities of the characters. As pointed out by Farr, there is a compulsion in scholarship on chick lit to focus overwhelmingly on ideological analysis to the detriment of the interpretive possibilities of the field. Another constructive way to approach the limitations in scholarship is through a broadened framework of genre as articulated by John Frow in his book *Genre* (2006).
Genre: A Turn Towards the Reader

Frow’s work is significant because it presents genre as neither stable nor singular; it is not a matter of “taxonomical purity” (2006, 76) and there is no genre “master list” (2). While I do not seek to advance a new definition of genre in this thesis, from this point, I put forward an understanding of genre as a “framing device,” as inspired by Frow’s analysis. Frow is less interested in identifying or classifying genre than he is in considering how genre works to produce particular kinds of knowledge and meaning. According to Frow, genre is an organisational practice that contextualises and delimits the interpretation of a text for the reader. Genre, then, is not a property of the texts itself: “Genre is neither a property of and located ‘in’ texts, nor a projection of and located ‘in’ readers; it exists as a part of the relationship between texts and readers, and it has a systematic existence” (112). Drawing on Janet Giltrow, Frow further explains how the act of classification simultaneously evokes a discursive community and, thus, genre becomes a question of “use” (7) that occurs between the textual structure and social situations in which they occur (14).

While scholarship remains largely focused on the ideological significance of the “prototypical” chick lit novel — authors of chick lit, such as Cathy Yardley (2006), point out that chick lit “isn’t what they (critics) think it is. It probably isn’t even what you think it is. And the parameters and definitions of the genre are changing daily” (4). Contrary to the scholarship on chick lit, Yardley simply defines the genre as, “the overgeneralized moniker for contemporary women’s fiction, with as many facets and faces as
contemporary women themselves” (9). Yardley could be quoting Frow himself when she refutes the idea of a genre masterlist: “a list that is potentially endless, not least because new genres are constantly emerging and old ones changing their function” (Frow 2006, 30). To return to the point made by Farr, and now supplemented with Frow, analysis of chick lit as a closed genre convention does indeed appear to be a blunt and restrictive instrument to apply to these novels (Frow 2006, 110).

Frow’s analysis presents the possibility for analysis that is focused more on the reader than internal analysis of the text. In the case of Heiss’ literature, this is arguably productive for a number of reasons. Firstly, Frow partly presents genre as a means of binding meaning to certain social situations. In Chapter Two, I discussed how Heiss used the genre to deliver a particular political message. Critical reviews of Heiss’ chick lit affirmed the novels as an articulation of the genre, but also noted their explicit political dimension as a point of distinction. Frow emphasises the subjective and interpretative dimension of genre, and, these elements cannot be measured through internal analysis or even reference to critical reviews. A reader-response approach can also extend and complement the intersectional ideological analysis I have presented on Heiss’ novels.

To some extent, this work on reader-response theory and Heiss’ novels has been advanced in Mathew’s second article, “Educating the Reader in Anita Heiss’ Chick Lit” (2016b). This article is significant in that it seeks to supplant a focus on ideological analysis with a focus on the reader. She presents Heiss’ novels as “advice manuals” that
are designed “to expose readers to the correct norms of behaviours for interacting with Australia’s First Peoples” (1). Heiss does also discuss her writing as a pedagogical tool: “I want them to learn things, but I want all my books to teach in some way” (Heiss 2017). But, her approach is more evocative of the language of reconciliation with an emphasis on understanding, assistance and discussion than it is bluntly didactic: “I’m trying to create something that has a lasting life and will be used in classrooms to generate conversations and help people understand their role in society” (Heiss 2017). Mathew’s analysis is premised on a hypodermic model of education in which Heiss overtly instructs and directs her readership on Indigenous affairs, but this model does not account for the subjective experience of genre articulated by Frow.

The Cultural Interface: Engagement not Education

Anne Brewster’s scholarship provides a productive way of theorising a model of reader engagement for Heiss’ novels. Her work seeks to understand how protest writing by Aboriginal authors makes race as a social construct apparent to the reader. Although Brewster’s theorisation often involves a white reader, her thinking is applicable to the broader non-Indigenous community. In particular her work on the protest poetry of Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Lisa Bellear bears relevance for this discussion.40 Brewster considers how these poets “engage” (2008, 56), “position” (2007, 210) and “interpellate”

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40 Brewster reads “Feelings” (1996) by Lisa Bellear and Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s “Are you Beautiful Today” and “Shall I surprise you by my will?”. 
Brewster’s articles consider how poems produce a space of encounter between the reader and the Indigenous voice in the text. Brewster also identifies this space as “a zone of relationality” (2007, 216), “a zone of interracial sociability” (2008, 56), a space of “cross racial encounter” (2007, 210) and a “dialogic, interactive space” (2007, 211). This is achieved through the exposure, or “witnessing of whiteness” — an idea adapted from Michelle Fine — that makes the reader aware of the salience of race for Australian identity and nationalism (2008, 211).

In her article “Engaging the Public Intimacy of Whiteness” (2008) Brewster holistically approaches the question of the reading audience. In order to counter literary tradition that implies a “disinterested, universal, abstract and disembodied” (56) audience, she proposes the term “publics”, that incorporates the multiple and differentiated audiences drawn to a text (56). She writes:

Borrowing from Michael Lipsky, I differentiate between the non-Indigenous ‘target’ group of Indigenous protest (the body of policy-makers that formulates governmental management, legislates in Indigenous affairs and produces a discourse of pedagogical nationalism) and “reference” publics (white liberals who read and disseminate Indigenous literature) (56).

Through her focus on a reading audience and the Indigenous author, Brewster’s scholarship does, to some extent, align with Mathew’s. Where she differs is in her disavowal of the idea of education of the reader for a focus on the act of reading as a “dialogic and interactive space” (2007, 211). With the exception of “Brokering Cross Racial Feminism,” Brewster’s work emphasises that although these texts are not for the
white reader, they can perform this function. Indigenous authors act as interlocutors: “addressing, engaging, critiquing and reshaping the knowledge and sensibilities of whiteness and non-Indigenous audiences and publics, thereby reconfiguring cross-cultural relations” (2015, xviii). This contrasts with Mathew’s argument for the “pedagogical function” (2016b, 5) of the novels and moves the focus towards the engagement of an audience rather than its education.

Brewster’s analysis provides a nuanced means of considering the moment of interaction between text, author and reader. Her work on the “space” and “zone” of encounter is significant to this thesis and these ideas find greater coherence in her application of Martin Nakata’s concept of “the cultural interface,” developed in her book Giving this Country a Memory (2015). In this collection Brewster conducts literary analysis of a number of texts by Indigenous authors that is complemented by conversation with the authors themselves. The collection stems from an “ethical impulse” (xii) to produce a “cross-cultural dialogue” (xii) in which the scholastic frameworks of the academy are taken to the authors in the spirit of “collaboration and exchange” (xii).

The cultural interface, in its most distilled form, refers to the space, or zone of negotiation, between traditional Indigenous knowledges and mainstream or Western knowledges (Nakata, 199). Nakata emphasises the primacy of Indigenous knowledges and subjectivity as a means of complicating academic discourse and stereotypical understandings of Indigeneity. He writes:
[The] priority to see the everyday world of the Islander as a productive theoretical space, the Cultural Interface, which is a re-theorisation of the lived position as the space where generations of Islander people make and remake themselves as they encounter competing and changing traditions. The conceptualization of the lived space challenged the simple binary constructions of Islander people as cultural ‘others’ and ruptures theorizing of ‘problems’ as arising out of ‘clashes’ between traditional and Western values (Nakata, 12).

To adapt this for the act of reading we can theorise the cultural interface as the moment in which views about Indigenous people are met with representation by Indigenous people; that is, the moment in which Indigeneity is no longer objectified and is instead reaffirmed by Indigenous subjectivity and experience.

To summarise, scholarship that presupposes a “normative,” “traditional,” or “prototypical” expression of chick lit as a genre lends itself to the logic that supposed incarnations of the genre by women of colour are deviant. This tradition is aided by the propensity to legitimate and evaluate the value of the genre with respect to second wave feminism, an approach that occludes the histories of women of colour. Although my ideological reading of Heiss’ novels seeks to re-dress this, this form of analysis still only goes some way towards accounting for the broader significance of these novels. Mathew’s consideration of the reader is a productive development in extending the boundaries of scholarship in the field. Her analysis, however reduces the complexity of the reading act by proposing a hypodermic model of education. Again, this conclusion is drawn from a singularly ideological reading of the novels.
The next chapter departs from an ideological reading of the novels, and draws on Frow’s more porous understanding of genre to incorporate readers’ perspectives on Heiss’ chick lit. This is undertaken through analysis of reviews and surveys collected from reviewers on the book reviewing website Goodreads.
IV. The Reader: Goodreads Reviews of Heiss’ Chick Lit

This chapter considers the role of the reader with respect to the mechanisms of consecration and legitimation of genre fiction. Specifically, I consider the reader who participates in reviewing literature on the book review website, Goodreads. Reader-generated reviews are a valuable source for researchers interested in pursuing questions pertaining to genre. As of September 3, 2018 Goodreads now features over 80 million reviews with membership numbering in excess of 80 million (Goodreads, n.d.). These reviews provide a space for an exploration of the cogency of genre as an interpretive frame and for testing scholastic arguments pertaining to the boundaries of genre in racially thematic chick lit.

In the first half of this chapter, I draw on discussion of different formations of group-based reading communities including book clubs, mass reading events and online reading communities. I argue that across reading studies scholarship there exist recurrent themes and ideas irrespective of the articulation of the formation of the reading group. While critics such as Anna S. Ivy argue that it is naïve to generalize about reading groups, as they take many forms and serve many purposes (quoted in Rehberg Sedo 2011, 11), I suggest that attention to these recurrent themes and ideas can be beneficial in the analysis of new social valences of reading, such as online reading platforms. In the

41 Different formations of reading groups include: literary salons, author reader relationships, face-to-face book clubs, television programs, online chat rooms, formal reading groups designed by cultural authorities and mass reading events.
second section of this chapter I consider reader reviews of Heiss’ four chick lit novels: *Not Meeting Mr Right. Avoiding Mr Right, Manhattan Dreaming* and *Paris Dreaming* as a means of exploring the boundaries of genre and consideration of the educative and transformative power of literature in raising racial consciousness.

**Social Reading Formations**

Scholarship on social reading formations extends a tradition of scholarship focused on the reader. Although “reading investigation and theory” (Rehberg Sedo 2017) began as early as the 1920s, Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984) signaled a departure in literary criticism and further consolidation of reading studies as an identifiable field in literary studies. Her work challenged the authority of the dominant mode of interpretation centred on “the implied reader,” and in her place emphasised the social significance of reading. Critics such as Wolfgang Iser (1978) and Stanley Fish (1980) had, to some extent, excavated the reader from literary criticism by highlighting interpretative practices available to a diversity of reading audiences. It took Radway’s sociological approach, however, to fully materialise the reader.

Primarily, reading studies scholarship emphasises the ideals of community and democracy, and in conjunction with an intimate and dialogic component, suggest the potential that literature yields for social change through a complication of private and public spheres. To guide my discussion of Goodreads, and to contextualise this analysis
within the framework of reading studies, I put forward the term “Social Reading Formations” (SRFs) to capture the various articulations of reading groups that are composed of a dialogic and interactive component formed around a text. In this chapter I define the responses collected from Goodreads as reviews and not commentary. Although online reviews are arguably based in the language of emotion, a metric of criticism distinct from academic reviewing practices, responses still operate as a form of recommendation based on a star classification system and critical analysis of the text.42

Online SRFs are a relatively recent social phenomenon. Their appearance, however, is not without precedent. As argued by DeNel Rehberg Sedo (2003), “on-line [reading groups] have roots in off-line realities” (86). Drawing on Elizabeth Long’s ethnographic study of reading groups, Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading and Everyday Life (2003), Rehberg Sedo (2003) and Ann Steiner (2008) link online reading groups to their face-to-face counterparts. These scholars extend Long’s study and argue that through dialogue — and literature’s inherent capacity to foster personal identification — women’s reading groups can become sites of social change. That is, they can be personally transformative and democratic spaces. Rehberg Sedo (2003; 2011) and Nancy Foasberg (2012) emphasise that these transformative and “democratic” elements are arguably consistent with online SRFs. As argued by Rehberg Sedo (2011), “shared

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42 For further discussion on the boundary between commentary and criticism in online reviewing platforms, see Imogen Mathew’s article “Reviewing Race in the Digital Literary Sphere: A Case Study of Anita Heiss’ Am I Black Enough for You?” (2016).
reading is both a social process and social formation” (1). Drawing on her edited collection, *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace* (2011), Rehberg Sedo identifies two linking phenomena in historical and contemporary SRFs. The first is the notion of “community;” the second is the role of “education” (2). Foasberg echoes this characterisation by emphasising the centrality of the idea of community in SRFs and identifying their “educational potential” (2012, 50). She further identifies another two elements integral to SRFs: the text, and the social reader. She writes, “both online and off, readers interact with each other around texts. Both the interpersonal interaction and the interaction with the text itself are necessary components to these communities” (2012, 34).

The concept of community is central to most scholarship on historical and contemporary SRFs. As Rehberg Sedo (2011) writes:

*Using the term “community” gets to the heart of the notion that social formations can shape themselves around a text. It helps us recognize the factors at play as community members search for meaning within a text, sort out power structures, and, ultimately, gain the knowledge that comes from exposure to, and discussion of, new and unfamiliar concepts.* (11)

Rehberg Sedo acknowledges that within existent scholarship the term “community,” often lacks distinction and precision. Clarity, however, can be pursued through a consideration of the term “commune.” She writes, “the commune is the key social construct that emerges when people build and share connections through a book, or a serial, or a readers’ guide, or even a review” (2011, 11). For Rehberg Sedo, and like Foasberg (2012), the act of reading within a social framework is a community building
exercise (5). That is, reading can be considered to be a social act with public ramifications.

This argument is extended in Danielle Fuller and Rehberg Sedo’s study, *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (2013). In this study they extend Lauren Berlant’s (1997) concept of “the intimate public sphere” (viii) to mass reading event, in order to theorise the “citizen reader” (viii) who, very simplistically, participates in a community that is unified by consumer culture. They write, “[the reader] participates in a public that is produced by the consumption of ‘common texts and things,’ which appear to articulate a shared emotional knowledge, and thus proffer the fantasy of ‘emotional contact’ with others” (2013, viii). The intermingling of private and public spheres, and an emphasis on the social dimension of SRFs has likely produced the substantial interest and focus on the idea of democracy and democratic spaces in reading studies scholarship.

Much like the use of the term community, this notion of democracy similarly lacks cogent definition in reading studies (see Rehberg Sedo 2003, Vlieghe and Rutton 2013; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2014). The term, however, can be considered in alignment with both Rehberg Sedo (2011) and with Foasberg’s (2012) characterisation of SRFs as educational spaces, in that both are based on principles of participation and exchange. Across existent scholarship three re-current concepts are associated with the argument for democratic spaces. Firstly, reading groups challenge traditional hierarchical models of cultural evaluation (see Rehberg Sedo 2011; Verboord 2013, 922), that is, they challenge
metrics of literary criticism centralized in academia and cultural critics.\textsuperscript{43} Secondly, they are spaces of connection that provide the opportunity for identification with other members and the text (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2014). Finally, they are sites of exchange (Rehberg Sedo 2003; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2014). SRFs are social formations that afford discussion and debate. In particular, this idea of connection and exchange is intimately linked to the argument for the transformative potential of reading groups located in what Rehberg Sedo describes as “organic dialogic democracy” (2003, 85).

A New Reader: Reading Online

In contemporary reading studies the embodied reader is theorised in a diversity of ways. Classification is largely dependent on and relative to the reader’s SRF and readers are often classified in opposition to their “institutionalised” understanding. Robert Clarke and Marguerite Nolan (2014) consider “lay readers” in their study of Australian book clubs, Matthews (2016b) discusses “professional” and “non-professional” readers. In opposition to an understanding of reading as a solitary practice, Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2013) discuss “the social reader” and “the citizen reader.” Scholars that study online reading platforms have defined the reader in terms more closely associated with the role of “the reviewer.” For example, Marc Verboord (2014) classifies Goodreads participants as “citizen reviewers” and Steiner (2008), in opposition to established literary critics, defines

\textsuperscript{43} Verboord (2013) argues that “increasingly internet users are bypassing institutional gatekeepers and experts for the content-generated by their counterparts” (922).
them as “private critics.” Critics such as Joachim Vlieghe, Jaël Muls and Kris Rutten (2016) do acknowledge online reading practices as inherently social, but refer to Goodreads participants simply as “users.” Critical characterisation of the online reader is largely dependent on the interpretation and classification of Goodreads, Amazon and blogs, of which there are divergent and diverse readings.

Goodreads was founded in December 2006 and publicly launched in January 2007 with a membership that numbered around 650,000 (Goodreads, n.d.) and a catalogue of approximately 10,000,000 books. As of September 3, 2018 Goodreads features over 80 million reviews and members, with 2.3 billion catalogued books (Goodreads, n.d.). Goodreads guiding “mission” is to “help people find and share the books they love”. The website is comprised of three core features: book discovery, content access and user interaction. A core defining feature of the site involves the “bookshelf,” in which users can review previously read books or flag books for future reading. Founder Otis Chandler describes Goodreads in the following way:

[Goodreads] is a place where you can see what your friends are reading and vice versa. You can create "bookshelves" to organise what you've read (or want to read). You can comment on each other's reviews. You can find your next favourite book. And on this journey with your friends you can explore new territory, gather information, and expand your mind (“About”, n.d.).

In simple terms Goodreads identifies itself as a site for readers and for book recommendations. Scholars, however, differ in their classification of the site. Primarily, minor distinctions occur around the degree to which the site can be characterised as a
social media platform. In scholarship, Goodreads has been classified as a “bibliocentric networking site” (Foasberg 2012; Naik 2012), a “social media platform” (Vlieghe, Muls and Rutten 2013), and, as a “hybrid site,” that is neither entirely a book based or social network site (Thelwall and Kousha, 2017). Similarly, Lisa Nakamura (2013) stresses hybridity by defining Goodreads as a “biblio-centric” and “egocentric” network of public reading performance (240). Complementing the question of classification is an enquiry into the user dynamics of online SRFs. Again, the notion of community is recurrent. Where Foasburg (2012), Nakamura (2013) and Verboord (2014) contextualise community within the framework of social media platforms, Vlieghe, Muls and Rutton (2016) propose that sites such as Goodreads are not necessarily communities at all but what should be considered as “affinity spaces” (27). They interrogate the “democratic” nature of Goodreads by analysing the structure of the website and the way that it positions and prompts users to behave. In the tradition of reading studies scholarship, they do not provide an explicit definition of democracy, however, they do point out the ambiguity of this engineered space as one of either “confirmation and comfort” or “confrontation and conflict” (5). Vlieghe, Muls and Rutton’s study is significant for two reasons: firstly, they argue that the notion of community in corporate online reading sites must be considered as engineered and not organic. Secondly, they argue for a foundational understanding of the internet and social media platforms as non-hierarchical and essentially democratic structures. Classification of the site and its internal dynamics represents one of the primary
questions recurrent in scholarship on online SRFs. Another dominant concern is the
classification and theorisation of the reader and reading practice.

Mike Thelwall and Kayvan Kousha (2016) provide a comprehensive overview of
the presumed identity of the Goodreads reader. Based on analysis of over 50,000
Goodreads accounts, they conclude that approximately 75% of the sites users are female.
This statistic largely coheres with current estimates that women readers constitute roughly
80% of the fiction market and also extends a tradition that identifies reading groups as
historically female spaces (1).

The nature of online reading, interpretation and discussion reflects that of face-to-
face SRFs. Ann Steiner (2008) defines online reviewing practices as “private criticism;”
she is quick to note, however, that this is not a new social phenomenon, but does remain
historically distinct in its online expression. Private criticism differs from “established
criticism” — a form of critique associated with academic institutions and literary
reviewers — with respect to its heightened emotional quality, tone and self-identificatory
practices. Rehberg Sedo (2003) further argues that discussion occurs around emotional
bonds and “promotes an avenue for women to try on new ideas, to share experiences” (85).
Online reading and reviewing is, thus, arguably emotional and observably self-reflexive.44

44 The further question of why readers participate on Goodreads invites both a simple and complex response. Firstly, there is the continuum that can be drawn from earlier articulations of SRFs. The online format is perhaps a natural progression of this social grouping as technology continues to develop and connect people in more intimate ways. Secondly, there is the abstraction of the particular and distinct space provided by online SRFs. Yesha Naik (2012) suggests that online discussion is further aided by the user’s relative
Criticism/Commodification

Following on from the arguments put forward by Vlieghe, Muls and Rutton (2016), both Lisa Nakamura (2013) and Jolie Matthews (2016) further complicate the idea of Goodreads, and other online SRFs, as organic and democratic spaces. Nakamura stresses the commercial element of the site and raises the issue of the “commodification of reading” (241). She argues that Goodreads surreptitiously turns the reader into a “worker” (242) who becomes an “object to be collected” (241). That is, users’ participation comes at a price, or as Nakamura puts it, “we pay with our attention and our readerly capital, our LOLs, rankings, conversations, and insights into narrative, character and our literary tradition” (241). The implications of the commodification of reading are twofold: there is an implicit argument that this practice de-values the act of reading itself as it is reduced to an “algocratic practice” (Nakamura 2013, 242), and that Goodreads surreptitiously gathers content that can be sold to third parties, thus, further de-valuing and exploiting the intimate and personal nature of reading. Matthews (2016) re-enforces Vlieghe, Muls and Rutten’s (2016) emphasis on the engineered nature of the site. She points out that the site was reformed as more “book-centric” following a controversial incident in which an author was defamed. These criticisms make apparent the tensions

anonymity and also the asynchronous format of the website (322). These elements can protect users from perceived judgment and allow for considered and discussion dependent on the user’s schedule.

45 For further discussion on the issue of commodification, literary culture and digital communication technologies, see Murray, Simone. 2015 “Charting the digital literary sphere.” Contemporary Literature 56, no. 2: 311-339.

46 In this incident site moderators established terms of usage prohibiting certain kinds of discussion on Goodreads forums.
of the site, as a purported democratic free space versus one that is commercially owned and establishes the terms of service. Steiner (2008) argues that that literature can in fact benefit from the general marketing of reading exhibited on online SRFs and that literary interests are not necessarily in opposition to commercial interests. She argues that there are agendas apparent in all kinds of reading practices. For example, conventional literary criticism operates to create a hierarchy of literature that designates certain genres as superior (Farr 2009). As discussed throughout this thesis, this is often inflected by both gender and race.

Despite these criticisms, scholars still emphasise the importance of developing research on online SRFs as a new and transformative development in reading. The inherently social aspect of online SRFs represent what Nakamura (2013) describes as “new social valences of reading” (238). Correspondingly, Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2014) suggest that “the modern reader is aided not hindered by technological change,” and suggest that this is a development in historical reading practices (15). Research on online SRFs provides an opportunity to explore a new social phenomenon, one that examines the significance, social life and effects of literature in the 21st Century. For Heiss, consideration of an SRF that attends to her chick lit novels allows for the opportunity to expand analysis beyond an ideological reading.
Race and Reading Groups

In this section, I move away from generalized discussion to focus on how racially thematic literature is received and interpreted across various SRFs. As introduced in Chapter One, racially thematic literature is that which makes race as a social construct and organising logic of society apparent to the reader. I consider scholarship on SRFs that feature racially thematic novels from American, post-colonial and Australian context.

In the articles “Oprah’s Book Club and the Politics of Cross-racial Empathy” (2004) and “White Book Clubs and African American Literature: The Promises and Limitations of Cross Racial Empathy” (2008), Kimberely Chaboot Davis explores the significance of reading for fostering anti-racist coalitions. Both articles focus on “white” readers engaged in the reading of African American literature across various SRFs. Both articles highlight the importance of cross-racial empathic identification for making race and white-skin privilege visible to the white reader. Davis argues that the emotional nature of reading makes literature a powerful conduit for social change. She writes, “I contend that African-American literature in particular encourages readers to develop a politicized point of view about race, class and inequality that has the potential to influence their actions in the public sphere” (2008,158). In keeping with Fuller and Rehberg Sedo’s (2013) argument for the social reader, and an understanding that reading is a private act

47 For her study, Davis analyses reader responses from Oprah’s Book Club and across 21 book clubs in Boston (2008, 156).
48 I retain the language used by Davis and qualify that “whiteness” has a different implication in the American context.
with public ramifications, Davis argues that she is further contributing to a body of scholarship that seeks to erode the “separate spheres” paradigm: private versus public, masculine vs. feminine and the world of political action vs. the world of feeling (2004, 413). Overall, Davis’ work furthers an argument for the transformative potential of social reading.

In his article “Reading, Taste and Post-colonial Studies” (2009), James Proctor complicates the idea of the politically transformative power of reading as expressed in the discipline of post-colonial literary studies. Proctor suggests that post-colonial literary studies is predicated on an articulation of the reader who reads for personal transformation though the manufactured complication of post-colonial texts. The study was based on the BBC World Book Club (2006) that featured Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart (1958) in celebration of its 50th anniversary. The study was comprised of two book group discussions: one located in Achebe’s native Nigeria; the other, an online discussion between readers in London, Kano, Lagos and Scotland. The “non-professional” or “lay readers” of Proctor’s study demonstrate markedly variant readings of the novel that are distinct from interpretations posed in scholarship in the discipline of post-colonial literary studies. Proctor argues that the lay reader emphasised the novel’s simplicity as productive of a pleasurable reading experience. This stands in opposition to an academic or professional interpretation that reads the novel’s simplicity as, “the trickiness of the text, the manner in which it mischievously, strategically withholds information from the reader” (187).
The professional reader is, thus, argued to be both “trained and compelled to complicate the text by emphasising irony, contradiction, artifice, the unknowable and so on” (187). Proctor’s analysis does not seek to admonish academic or professional critique — merely to emphasise the diversity of interpretations that a text can produce. He delicately disentangles post-colonial literature from an academic emphasis on what he terms the “fantasy of the transformative potential of post-colonial literature” (188). The reader that is theorised in post-colonial literary studies is an abstraction distinct from a consideration of the social impact of reading. There is no acknowledgment of reading as a pleasurable and gratifying experience or of the impact that a text has on a reading public. Proctor argues that when professional readers make exaggerated claims with respect to post-colonial literature, this is particularly problematic, as we further miss an opportunity to consider the social lives of literature in the aftermath of Empire.

As explored in Chapter Two, there is a certain homology between academic debates and concerns across post-colonial literary studies and Australian Indigenous studies in which pleasure and enjoyment are displaced for a focus on the complexity and interpretive resistance of the text. An illustrative example of this mode of critique is demonstrated in Allison Ravenscroft’s, *The Post-colonial Eye: White Desire and the Visual Field of Race* (2002). In this text Ravenscroft considers how reading practices by settler Australians of “Aboriginal signed texts” re-affirm colonial relations by collapsing
difference in the text and reading the Indigenous subject as self-same (19). This mode of reading refuses the otherness of the text to protect what Ravenscroft calls “the fantasy of whiteness.” In one sense, Ravenscroft’s study is a meditation on the ethics of reading literature by Indigenous Australians. Ravenscroft suggests that, for the white reader, these texts produce moments of unintelligibility, that is, “places where reading cannot go on” (2). Indigenous culture is argued to be “bewilderingly strange and unknowable” (1) and cannot be integrated into settler epistemologies. Thus, Ravenscroft asserts an argument for radical and incommensurable difference Indigenous and settler culture.

Ravenscroft is interested in the transformative potential of these moments of textual resistance. Ravenscroft’s conception of transformation opposes the argument for empathic identification as productive of anti-racist coalitions (Davis 2004; 2008). For Ravenscroft, the inability to identify with the Indigenous subject produces a self-reflexive crisis that disturbs the subjectivity of the white reader. Ravenscroft endorses dis-identificatory practices that affirm an idea of incommensurate difference between Indigenous and settler audiences. Again, this mode of interpretation completely erases the possibilities of the pleasure of reading by emphasising resistance, silences and forced evasions of comprehension performed by the text. Ultimately, Ravenscroft reifies an idea of incommensurate difference between Indigenous and settler culture. Despite her argument for the transformative potential of resistant literature, her thesis is overwhelmingly pessimistic and forgoes the potential of the enjoyment of text. Further,
an emphasis on disturbance and resistance forgoes the opportunity to consider or acknowledge the social impact of Aboriginal literature for a diverse and varied reading audience.

In the article “Aboriginal Representation: Conflict or Dialogue in the Academy” (2010), Wiradjuri academic Jeanine Leane discusses some of the difficulties faced by non-Indigenous students reading literature by Indigenous Australians in the academic classroom. Based on her own experience teaching, Leane unpacks a history of deficit representations of Aboriginal Australians by settler writers that informs the way that non-Indigenous students “disconnect” (32) with Aboriginal literature. She argues that this occurs because “many of these representations do not conform to what these students thought they knew about us” (32). She argues, “it appears that there is a comfort zone where many non-Aboriginal students locate Aboriginality that they are reluctant to disturb” (36). In particular, this includes representations that counter deficit discourses and victim narratives of Aboriginality. Leane foregrounds pedagogical strategies for overcoming moments of disconnection that are grounded in the consideration of alternative historical narratives, cultural contexts and assuming responsibility for one’s own learning (37).

Robert Clarke and Marguerite Nolan have also taken up this line of enquiry in their study of book clubs based on what they term “fictions of reconciliation,” in which they focus on the significance of “reading as social practice.” In their study, Clarke and Nolan
consider reader responses of Kate Grenville’s novel *The Secret River* (2005). They point out that academic criticism of the novel suggests that, despite demonstrating sympathy towards Indigenous Australia, the novel nevertheless is complicit in upholding the conservative and nationalist myths it is purportedly interrogating (123). Through an analysis of the reception of *The Secret River* in a range of predominantly female reading groups, Nolan and Clarke seek to respond to the research question: “how does literature function in the public sphere?” (121). Of central importance to Clarke and Nolan’s study is their focus on how the lay reader reads, as opposed to the implied reader responses generated in academic scholarship. In accordance with the aforementioned scholars understandings of literature as a conduit for change, Clarke and Nolan conclude that reading performed the civic function of engaging readers in the politics of reconciliation, that is, “reading *The Secret River* brought them into a conversation; a conversation that the nation has found it impossible to avoid” (129). In this context, “conversation” is considered as a precursor for social and political transformation. In the course of their analysis Clarke and Nolan argue that lay readers’ interpretations of the novel differed significantly from the dominant academic interpretation. They found that the novel served as a prompt for reader discussion on the concept of reconciliation that furthers discussion on race and history. They conclude, “if book clubs provide spaces for discussions, then

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49 For further discussion of academic interpretation of *The Secret River*, see Odette Kelada’s article "The Stolen River: Possession and Race Representation in Grenville's Colonial Narrative" (2010).
perhaps such texts do facilitate the evolution of understanding of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians” (138).

**Reading and Transformation — A Space for Chick Lit?**

Both scholarship on SRFs and scholarship on post-colonial, racially thematic, and Aboriginal literature, emphasise the educative and transformative potential of reading. Analysis of Goodreads reviews of Heiss’ chick lit provides an opportunity to combine these two perceptions of reading. The incorporation of Heiss’ literature into this framework, however, requires some further qualification.

Farr has noted that because chick lit does not meet the standards of literary merit held by the academy, the dominant mode of scholarly analysis has been primarily ideological. With respect to reading studies conducted on chick lit, scholars have generally focused on the question of genre innovation (Mathew 2016a; Butler and Dessai 2008) and, in conjunction with the designation of chick lit as not serious literature, how online reader criticism of chick lit challenges the broader metrics of literary criticism (Steiner, 2008). With respect to Heiss, Mathew has approached her literature as an advice manual and analysed its “pedagogical function” (2016b, 5). The value of a reading studies approach to the literature of Heiss is that we are not constrained by a purely ideological reading of the texts or simply a hypodermic model of the education of the white reader. Broadly, a focus on online SRFs provides the opportunity to explore the social impact of Heiss’
novels. Analysis of Goodreads reviews also provides the opportunity to complicate
Ravenscroft’s thesis of incommensurate difference and Mathew’s argument for the strictly
pedagogical function of the novels. This framework for reading studies flows comfortably
into an application of Nakata’s conception of the cultural interface. While ideas of
education and transformation guide this discussion, Brewster’s conception of literature as
productive of an interactive space of encounter supplements the more reductive or
simplistic ideas of education.

Reader Responses and Goodreads

Goodreads, and other online SRFs, have been argued to be spaces that are especially
accommodating for readers of genre fiction. In particular, Goodreads has been described
as a community of “fans” who are comparable to the popular fiction readers
conceptualised in critical genre theory. Driscoll (2016) extends the idea of “textual
productivity” distinctive of fan studies to include online SRFs Amazon and Goodreads.
She argues that “a reader who creates a textual response to a book, author or a genre is a
fan” (425). This is not to say that all online reviewers are necessarily fans, but that the
format is conducive to fan culture in its support of textual productivity.

Nakamura (2013) identifies Goodreads as both “a literary network and fan
community” (240). Although Nakamura does not qualify her use of this term, we can
consider this idea in relation to Gelder’s theorisation of popular fiction readers as distinctly
“loyal” (81). Gelder acknowledges the presence of fans in the field of popular fiction. He notes that their engagements can be “intellectual and even quasi-academic” (75) and that their competence in genre convention makes them “careful discriminators of the field” (36).

Further, the commercial affiliations of major online SRFs have been argued to render them an appropriate vehicle for the more commercial field of popular fiction. Mark McGurl (2016) further reifies this perception in his argument that commercial SRFs — specifically Amazon — have exaggerated the commercial nature of popular fiction by expediting the processes of publishing, consumption and criticism of material that is made possible through the immediacy of an online format. Nakamura (2013), however, cautions against a simplistic reading of online SRFs as wholly commercial. In opposition, she argues that “readers’ tastes reflect the traditional literary canon more closely than one might expect” (240). Nakamura’s qualification still signals a dominant interpretation that identifies online SRFs in opposition to literature and as more closely associated with popular fiction. In this sense, online SRFs — especially those with publishing associations such as Amazon — represent a further extension of the apparatus of production, distribution and consumption that Gelder identifies as definitive of popular fiction. He writes: "it is as if popular fiction is 'pure ideology', simply a matter of commerce, nothing more or less than a product" (55). This conceptualisation finds affinity with McGurl's

\[50\] Gelder (2004) even more explicitly states “popular fiction has fans” (2004, 81).
linking of genre fiction and online SRFs that extends Gelder's conceptualisation of popular fiction as “capitalism's most perfect form” (35). Textual responses generated on online SRFs, therefore, are valuable sources for research on questions of definition and qualitative judgment of genre fiction.

Aims and Significance

As demonstrated in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, critics and scholars are divided over the extent to which the political dimension of Heiss’ chick lit is reconcilable with the focus on fun and consumerism definitive of the genre (Becerra-Gurley 2007; Guivarra 2007; Fullerton 2010; Kaye 2011; Ommundsen 2011; Mathew, 2016a). Drawing on reader responses collected from Goodreads, I am interested in how genre readers perceive the argued disjuncture that is delineated between politics and genre identified in Heiss’ chick lit. More generally, this discussion also interrogates a perception that chick lit cannot incorporate politics of racial and ethnic difference (Ferriss and Young 2006; Oggunaike 2004; Morrison 2010; Ommundsen 2011; Mathew 2016a).

In their article, “Manolos, Marriage, and Mantras: Chick-Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism” (2008) Butler and Desai engage with this binary in their analysis of South Asian American chick lit. Unlike much scholarship on chick lit that privileges an ideological reading of the genre, their analysis is significant in that they integrate reader responses in the form of online reviews. Drawing on online reviews of
the novel *Goddess for Hire* (2004), Butler and Desai argue that responses are “polarised.” Reviewers identify the novel as either: "a well written addition to the genre with a South Asian twist" or, "a mediocre example of formulaic chick lit devoid of any real creativity" (26). Butler and Desai’s study is significant in establishing a precedent for analysis of this interpretative disjuncture. However, their analysis of reader reviews is only perfunctory — about one paragraph — and operates to affirm the extent to which the novel may be read as a successful representation of the genre. This line of analysis sits uncomfortably with their primary argument that the novel tests the “flexibility, tensility and malleability” (27) of the genre in foregrounding non-white subjects.

I am interested in a more sustained and nuanced exploration of this argued disjuncture by attending to the subjective nature of reading through an understanding of genre as a framing device and supplemented by Hans Robert Jauss’ work on “the horizon of expectations” (1970). According to Frow, genre is an organisational practice that contextualises and delimits the interpretation of a text for the reader. It is, however, only a “fuzzy” organisational practice (80). Jauss’ work on “the horizon of expectations” (1970) is also important in establishing a more flexible frame for interpreting reader reviews of Heiss’ chick lit. Jauss puts forward the idea of the horizon of expectations as a structure that informs how a reader interprets and appraises a text. Jauss' theory considers how interpretations diverge based on the historical and cultural moment; an idea not dissimilar
to Frow’s understanding of genre as an organisational practice that contextualises and delimits the interpretation of a text for the reader.

For Heiss this is particularly significant. She is neither clearly aligned with either the heteronomous or autonomous poles of the literary field. Her writing appeals to a broad and differentiated reading public as she fuses the logics and practices of popular fiction with the ideas and concerns of her academic work. A focus on readers’ expectations of the texts allows for a more nuanced analysis of the disjuncture between politics and genre expressed in Heiss’ literature. Drawing on Frow and Jauss, this next section considers the expectations that readers bring to bear on Heiss’ literature, whether readers delineate the binary of politics versus genre raised by scholars in the field, or whether these reviews demonstrate distinct understandings of the novels outside of the frame of chick lit.

**Methodology**

A thematic review of reader responses using inductive coding demonstrates that chick lit may not be the singular frame through which Heiss’ chick lit is approached, despite its marketing. My analysis of reviews collected from Goodreads ultimately revealed that readers approach Heiss’ chick lit from three possible points of departure: as chick lit, as Aboriginal literature defined by the “nexus of the political and the literary” (Heiss and Minter 2008, 3), and as both.
I collected 65 qualitative reviews from Goodreads: 24 on *Not Meeting Mr Right*, 16 on *Avoiding Mr Right*, 20 on *Manhattan Dreaming* and five on *Paris Dreaming* in June 2016. I have discussed the novels as a consistent group owing to their shared universe, in which related characters experience a similar story of personal development. I have omitted star-based responses from my analysis. Although these responses demonstrate components of the review in that they act as a classification system of merit, they omit the critical rationale outlining their classification and are accordingly of less utility in this study. To interpret the responses, I employed the following method of analysis: inductive coding based on analysis of recognisable themes and discourse.

As a way of identifying reviewers’ expectations of the novels I returned to Gelder’s work on genre. According to Gelder all reading of popular fiction is “leisured” (23) and read for “entertainment” (35). Further, the genre of romance is understood as an act of escape (51). As introduced at the beginning of this thesis, Ann Steiner (2008) provides a cogent summary of reader expectations and reader experience of chick lit that is not dissimilar to Gelder’s more general theorisation of popular fiction: "Good chick lit novels are defined as fun, witty, easy and light reads dealing with real issues. Readers have to be able to sympathise with the main character; identification is, of course, the foundation of the genre" (sec. 5.14).

In Steiner's consideration of Amazon reviews of the chick lit novel *The Wonder Spot* (2005), she reinforces Gelder's understanding of genre readers as highly
knowledgeable and “quasi academic” (75) and argues that readers of chick lit display “meta- literary” competence and are highly adept at identifying genre and defining its boundaries. Steiner’s definition of chick lit, supplemented by Gelder’s more general theorisation of popular fiction, provides a strong framework against which to interpret reader reviews in that the language that reviewers use to review a text demonstrates the expectations and, accordingly, the interpretative frame that they have brought to the text.

Through a preliminary overview of the reviews on Goodreads for Heiss' four novels: *Not Meeting Mr Right, Avoiding Mr Right, Manhattan Dreaming* and *Paris Dreaming*, and the application of inductive coding, the following recurrent themes emerged:

- Comedy (funny or not funny)
- Feminist credentials of the text (sexist, not feminist or empowering)
- Education (providing or not providing new perspectives on Aboriginality for the reader)
- Characterisation (likeability and relatability of the protagonist)
- Mention of places (Melbourne, Sydney, New York, Paris, Canberra)
- Mention of Aboriginal voice and perspective
- Mention of politics (too polemic or expository)
- Quality of writing (easy read or badly written)
- Meta-literary competence (“so chick litty” or a good or bad take on chick lit)
- Mention of the author and her profession
Following this, I coded these reviews based on whether they reflected aspects of the definition of chick lit outlined above. Reviews must exhibit at least two of the criteria put forward by Steiner and supplemented by Gelder to be classified as related to chick lit.

Generally, the list above corresponded to criteria that Steiner defines as constitutive of chick lit. Already, readers seemed to be demonstrating their competence in chick lit by making distinctions about the extent to which the text fulfilled genre criteria based on the novel’s comedic qualities and the protagonists’ characterisations. Reviews were coded as interpreting the novels through the frame of chick lit based on whether they mentioned the genre explicitly or used the language of "fun, witty, light read; escape and leisure." 35 out of 65 reviewers identified the novel in accordance with the interpretative frame of chick lit.

A thematic review of reader responses demonstrates that, despite its marketing, chick lit may not be the singular frame through which Heiss’ chick lit is read. The remaining 30 reviews were not necessarily classifiable as using the language of chick lit. These reviews, instead, include themes such as “new perspectives,” “polemicism,” “Aboriginality,” and “focus on place.” In this next section I further refine and outline these remaining 30 reviews to isolate and explore other distinct interpretative lenses that exist outside of the language of chick lit. This includes: “short reviews,” reviews that focus on place, miscellaneous reviews and, finally, reviews that use the language of politics.
I classified 16 of the 65 reviews as what I term “short reviews”, a practice that reacts primarily on overall impression. They are not substantially self-reflexive and instead are largely emotional in response. Emotion at the expense of considered critical reflection means that short reviews are very brief; sometimes only one sentence long. For example, one reviewer wrote of Avoiding Mr Right: "Blugh! Awful, awful, awful". Another on Not Meeting Mr Right: "waste of Time". Although short reviews display little critical self-reflexivity, they remain significant and warrant mention in this study as a perfunctory response is just as significant as an elaborate one. None-the-less, because they lack self-reflexivity in their assessment, I do not attend to this class of review further.

A small portion of reviews, only three in total, focused only on place. Australia features prominently in all novels, specifically Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne. One reviewer commented that reading Manhattan Dreaming; "made me think nostalgically about things from Australia," suggesting that they are reading from abroad. Another wrote that they "love reading about places [they] LOVE," in this case Canberra. A further three remaining responses were categorised as “miscellaneous.” These responses referred to reviewers’ personal websites or were in a foreign language.

More numerous and substantial, however, were reviews that focused on the politics of the text; those that explicitly reference Aboriginal affairs and the racial politics of the novel. Along with reviews that used the language of chick lit, reviews that employed the language of politics constituted the third most substantive interpretative lens after short
reviews. Often, these discussions also feature an explicit mention of the author. Of the 15 responses that discuss the politics of the text eight also reference the author. Significantly, seven of the reviews that used the language of politics also employed the identifying language of chick lit.\footnote{Out of the 35 reviewers who used the identifying language of chick lit in their reviews, seven also used the language of politics.} Although, there remains a discernible divide between readers who approach the texts through the interpretative lens of chick lit and those who interpret the novel outside of the language of genre, the reviewers that employ the dual language of politics and chick lit demonstrate that the interpretative lens readers bring to bear on Heiss literature is complex, and eludes a simplistic categorisation of her literature.

In the next section I further interrogate these findings by considering how readers’ expectations of the text as delineated by either chick lit or through a politically inflected frame influences the overall reading experience, enjoyment and appraisal of the novel.
This allows for a consideration of the extent to which classification of genre may affect qualitative readings of the text. In order to qualify whether reviewers’ expectations were met or evaded by the novels, I attended to the qualifying language used in the reviews.

**Reader Expectations and Reviewers who used the Identifying Language of Chick Lit**

In discussing genre, readers have already delineated their expectations of the chick lit novel; that it is fun, witty and with identifiable and likeable characters. Overall, 35 reviewers identified Heiss’ novels as chick lit, 15 of whom explicitly used the term “chick lit” in their response and another two of whom used the term “Aboriginal chick lit.”

In order to ascertain whether reviewers’ expectations were met or evaded by the novels I considered the qualitative language used in the reviews. That is, whether the identifying language of genre outlined by Steiner was discussed in positive or negative terms. I classified a reviewer as having had their expectations of the novel met if they discussed at least two elements of the genre in a positive way. For example, “the novel is funny and easy to read.” For a review to be classified as not having its expectations met, the reviewer had to discuss two identifying elements of the genre in a negative way, for example, “the novel is not funny and not easy to read.” Reviewers that only had their expectations partly met were those who discussed the novels in equally positive and negative ways. Of the reviews that I identified as using the language of chick lit 12 used language that suggested that their expectations of the novels were not met, four used
language that indicated that their expectations were partly met and 19 used language that indicated that their expectations were met. At times, reviewers present similar language in their assessment of the novels, but diverge on whether their expectations of the novel were met. For example, one reviewer who read *Not Meeting Mr Right* disliked the aspects of the novel that, according to Steiner’s definition, make it a “good” example of chick lit (Steiner 2008, sec. 5.14). They wrote: “Easy to read, easy to digest, easy to finish ... and remember not much of it. Lose yourself for a couple of hours stuff, but leaves you hungry for a book that makes you think.” Conversely, another reviewer who read *Paris Dreaming* uses similar language to discuss how their expectations of the novel were met: “Enjoyable. Followed the usual tropes of romance but was much more intelligent and engaged, in a light-hearted, light-handed way with political issues.” This kind of divergence underscores that interpretation of genre can be individual and subjective.

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**Fig. 2.** Graph depicting breakdown of expectations of reviewers who use the language of chick lit.

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52 Of the reviewers who were cross-coded as genre and politics four have their expectations of genre met and one does not.
As defined by Steiner, identification with the main character is the “foundation” of chick lit (Steiner 2008, sec. 5.14) The reviewers who I have coded as having their expectations met reference characterisation and discuss the protagonists of Heiss’ novels in positive terms. Lauren from *Manhattan Dreaming* is discussed as “amazing,” while another reviewer emphasises the quality of her characterisation: “loved this story I could imagine the characters - actually I think I know these people!” Two reviewers discuss the protagonist Peta from *Avoiding Mr Right*. One writes that “[she’s] an amazing character…confident, funny and up for a good time,” the other comments on her initial frustration but ultimate complete involvement with the character. A further reviewer personally identifies with Lauren from *Manhattan Dreaming*, in that, as an Indigenous woman the character explicitly challenges racial stereotypes. She writes:

> Often Indigenous peoples consciously change or moderate their behaviour to accommodate others and to consciously attempt to break down some of the stereotypes, (ie. Lauren's being on time or early for everything in an attempt to break the stereotype of 'Koori time'. I giggled out loud at this one, as it is something I consistently do for those very reasons).

Of the reviewers who demonstrate expectations as being partially met, two discuss the protagonists of *Manhattan Dreaming* and *Paris Dreaming*, the latter writing that “she found the main character a bit mean so [she] didn’t warm to her.” Six of the 11 reviewers whose expectations were not met negatively discuss characterisation. Primarily, this corresponded to the “unlikeability” of the main characters. Reviewers found the
protagonists of Avoiding Mr Right and Not Meeting Mr Right respectively “unlikable” and “alienating.”

A number of reviewers expressed disappointment with the quality of the writing. A reviewer who read Not Meeting Mr Right wrote: “A great idea but poorly written.” Another wrote of Avoiding Mr Right, “possibly one of the worst chick lit books I've ever read. Awful characters, stilted dialogue and terrible plot. Arrggh, just a painful read.” These reviews deepen an understanding that reader expectations and enjoyment is predicated on the quality of the literature rather than simply its adherence to formula.

Other reviewers indicated that their expectations of the novels were eluded in a positive way. In their analysis of reader responses focused on the Richard and Judy Book Club, Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2013) observe a phenomenon which they term the “dance of distinction”, which signals “readers resistance towards popular forms of book culture as they work to maintain their own distinctiveness through articulation of taste” (83). Six of the reviewers preface their responses with their aversion to the genre. This included the responses: “I hardly ever read so called chick lit” and, “first things first, chick lit isn’t really my thing.” These reviewers demonstrate surprise regarding their enjoyment of these novels. Reasons for enjoyment differs from reader to reader. One writes that, “there is a much deeper dialogue taking place,” another wrote that she read an interview with Heiss and she, “didn’t sound like she was going to write the normal crap”. This reviewer clearly indicates that she “can’t stand the pretentious wank, the incredibly stupid and unlikable
heroines and even more stupid storylines,” that is, Heiss’ literature is an exception to this reviewer’s usual reading tastes. Generally, these reviewers indicate how the novels challenged and exceeded the negative conceptions they hold of the genre. Still, they classify these books categorically as chick lit, thus, challenging the argument that these books deviate from genre.

Reader Expectations and Reviewers who used the Language of Politics

Reader responses that use the discernible language of chick lit express a readily identifiable framework against which their expectations can be read. Responses that discuss the texts in accordance with a consideration of the politics of the novels are more resistant to a clearly discernible consideration of expectations. Seven of these reviews are cross-coded with reviews pertaining to chick lit, however, they also demonstrate sustained or explicit consideration of the politics of these novels. As noted, the explicit nature of these reviews provide some insight into the readers’ expectations of the novels. These reviews demonstrate four evident themes: firstly, a sense that the novels are didactic; secondly, the extent to which the novels provide new perspectives on Aboriginality; thirdly, that the novels’ balance politics with genre convention; and finally, the significance of the author in providing the impetus for reading her books.

Reviewers who express criticism of Heiss’ literature emphasise the “antagonistic,” “didactic,” “alienating” and “heavy handed” presentation of politics in her literature.
Frustration or rejection of the politics in Heiss’ literature is perhaps indicative of, in Jauss’ terms, the evasion of the readers’ horizon of expectations. The diversity of these reviews, however, is reflective of Heiss’ ambition to “reach an audience of non-Aboriginal women — largely aged between 18 and 45 years of age — who may not have cared about Aboriginal women in Australia before” (2012, 215). One reviewer discusses Heiss’ politics as “hypocritical” and another qualifies Not Meeting Mr Right as “terrible.” Two reviewers demonstrate that their politics largely cohere with Heiss, however, they reject the presentation of these politics as articulated by the main protagonist. These reviewers do not reject the politics of the novels; just the way that those politics are presented. As identified by Mathew, the distinct passages that represent a switch to exposition are didactic in tone (2016a, 5). As one reviewer put it, “[Manhattan Dreaming] is all telling and no showing” and the novel is “didactic (read: condescending).” Another reviewer indicates that despite being a white ally of Indigenous affairs: “A black-arm banded whitefella multiculturalist female academic,” with clear sympathies for the protagonist’s political and historical views, the expression and presentation of this “clear political agenda” in Not Meeting Mr Right is “antagonistic and alienating.” Significantly, this reviewer discusses her criticism of the text within the politics of reconciliation. Her primary criticism is that the novel “[precludes] all possibility of a reconciliatory conversation.” Implicit in this criticism is an expectation of the text — the promotion and expression of politics as “reconciliatory.”
In a similar vein, reviewers also comment on the extent to which the novels provide new perspectives on Aboriginality. For example, one reviewer expresses disappointment with *Not Meeting Mr Right*: “it was absolutely disappointing in respect to the Aboriginal culture. I’m not Aboriginal but I didn’t really get any idea of what is like from the story.” This reviewer demonstrates an expectation of “new perspectives,” that is, a desire for education. This expectation is unmet as they conclude that, “[they] stepped away from the book not learning anything new.” These two readers demonstrate divergent expectations of the texts through the frame of Aboriginal literature rather than genre. These reviews again demonstrate that while Aboriginal literature and the nature of online SRFs may be conducive to the possibility of personal transformation and education, this is highly contingent on the reader and the expectations that they bring to bear on the text.

Scholarship on online SRFs emphasise the qualities of community and democracy in association with the principles of exchange and transformation. They remain, however, distinct from the face-to-face SRFs discussed by Davis, and are arguably productive of a distinctive space in the reading of racially thematic literature or Aboriginal narrative. Where face-to-face SRFs are public entities, online SRFs provide the user relative anonymity that may be productive of a distinct mode of discussion less hindered by the social niceties of face-to-face interaction. As argued by Mathew (2016c) in her article “Reviewing Race in the Digital Literary Sphere,” online SRFs provide a unique space to
examine reader’s negotiation of racial identity. As much as literature can perform the function of producing transformation and the fostering of anti-racist coalitions — scholarship has yet to adequately engage with the possibility that literature, especially when mediated through online SRFs, may further compound racial stereotypes. Primarily, this is because the nature of this scholarship has focused exclusively on face-to-face SRFs. By virtue of participation, readers in face-to-face SRFs demonstrate a willingness to engage with the text. Still, readers of Heiss’ literature have also demonstrated willingness in that the sheer act of reading and composing a review indicates a concerted effort. The act of composing an online review is an act of willingness, however, as demonstrated in the short reviews, this engagement is not necessarily a substantially self reflexive act. In opposition to much of the scholarships on SRFs, these reviews complicate an understanding that these spaces are democratic and transformative. Cumulatively, these reviews re-enforce the highly subjective nature of reading. We can acknowledge the individuality of the reader; their cultural background, economic standing and personal experience — in that they extract meaning in a way that makes sense to them.

Other reviewers, however, did enjoy the political dimensions of the novels. One wrote that “the them and us was a little heavy” but still found this “refreshing.” Another, emphatically characterised the diversity of representation in *Manhattan Dreaming* as
“fabulous”. This reviewer is excited by the relative absence of “white characters” from
the novel. They wrote:

Basically, the only white character of any significance is Lauren’s douchbag boyfriend, Adam, who’s a rugby player. So from a diversity perspective seeing true-to-life Indigenous characters from a range of communities around the world? YES. 10/10 would recommend.

Five reviewers indicated that the political dimension of the novels worked well with
the conventions of the genre. One reviewer discussed her pleasure at the representation of
diversity in Manhattan Dreaming: “The diversity in this book is FABULOUS. I mean, how
often do you see diverse characters in a leading role in chick lit? Almost never, in my
experience.” Another reviewer wrote of Paris Dreaming: “Enjoyable. Followed the usual
tropes of romance but was much more intelligent and engaged, in a light-hearted, light-handed way with political issues.”

As discussed in Chapter One, Heiss’ work as an academic also plays a significant
role in her identity as an author. Lahire’s conception of the second job helps us understand
Heiss’ work in academia as entirely complementary and constitutive of her overall public
profile. While scholarship on genre acknowledges that the industry of popular fiction is
partially defined by the public role of the author, who is intimately connected to their
readership through quick turnaround of output, Heiss remains unusual in that her role as
an academic and activist further characterises her role as an author.

Accordingly, some reviewers identified Heiss’ second job as what attracted
them to her literature and characterised their enjoyment based on how this translates into
the novels. Two reviewers demonstrated how the author prompted them to put aside their prejudices about the genre. Both reviewers were “intrigued” by the author, respectively, having read an interview with her and seeing her in a talk. They both characterise her as “interesting” and as a “fun intelligent person.” One reviewer reflects that the novel *Not Meeting Mr Right* was not the “normal crap” while the other dismisses the book *Manhattan Dreaming* as instantly “boring” and reflects that, “I should have trusted my gut in judging books by their cover. I’d never have given this book a second glance by cover alone.” In these instances the self-presentation of the author is enough to compel and alter reader’s prejudices regarding genre

**Surveys Collected from Goodreads Reviewers**

In the previous section I applied the work of Frow and Jauss as a way of understanding the interpretative frame that readers bring to bear on Heiss’ chick lit and how these expectations affect the qualitative reading experience. In this section, I extend this discussion through analysis of responses to a survey that I conducted with Goodreads reviewers. These responses provide the opportunity to substantially extend two ideas raised in the previous section: firstly, the question of genre and definition, not through the framework of expectation, but through analysis of what I term “route-to-reader.” Secondly, this section interrogates the idea of personal transformation and education of the reader; ideas particular to SRFs, racially thematic literature and scholarship on Heiss’
novels. This is undertaken through a return to Brewster’s application of Nakata’s concept of the cultural interface.

**Methodology**

Between December 2016 and March 2017 I collected 34 survey responses from Goodreads users who had reviewed Heiss’ chick lit novels. Surveys were sent out to all 65 reviewers analysed in the previous section. The survey consisted of nine questions that were generally designed to construct a clearer profile of reviewers’ reading tastes, preferences and personal identity; and to measure the reviewers’ enjoyment of the novels and the degree to which they found Heiss’ novels to be educational.

The specific wording of this final question, and its focus on education, was influenced by a number of distinct factors. This included Mathew’s understanding of Heiss’ literature as “advice manuals” that educate the reader (2016b), Heiss’ desire that her novels educate: “I want all my books to teach in some way, I don’t want to waste trees” (Heiss 2017), and critical reviews that show the significance of the novels as educative for a non-indigenous audience (Guivarra 2007). It also acknowledges scholarship that emphasises the educative element of racially thematic literature and how this may work with the implied and transformative dimensions of SRFs.
Analysis of Route-to-reader

The survey allowed respondents to qualify why they chose to read Heiss’ chick lit novels, thereby, providing potential further insight into the impact of Heiss’ multiple authorial personas in attracting a diverse reading audience. The reasons why and how audiences take up Heiss’ literature is referred to as the “route-to-reader.” In keeping with the previous analysis of Goodreads reviews, there is a clear demarcation between those who use the language of genre, and those who use the language of politics in their explanation of why they chose to read the novels. Given the understanding that genre establishes the frame of interpretation and expectations that readers bring to bear on a text, analysis of route-to-reader provides further insight into the conditions that produce this interpretative frame.

The route-to-reader pathway for Heiss’ chick lit can be summarised in the following ways: through the novels’ paratextual elements, through recommendation by an individual or institution, through exposure to the author, through a conscious desire to locate literature by women of colour, and, thorough serendipitous events.

A number of respondents suggest that they were influenced by the novels’ paratextual elements, specifically the book design. To return to Heiss’ discussion with her publisher: “the women who buy these books know what they are looking for, they’ll go in the shop and they don’t know specifically the title of the author [but] they will look for a book that looks like the one they just read” (Heiss 2017). One respondent made the decision to read *Not Meeting Mr Right* based on perfunctory analysis of the paratextual
elements of the novel: “It caught my attention, as it was something different to what I usually see. From the blurb, the novel sounded like a fun and easy read.” Another also uses the language of sight to explain route-to-reader: “Avoiding Mr Right caught my eye when it was just what I needed…” A further respondent continues this theme, “I picked it up thinking it was a romance, and I was interested to see the representation of Indigenous Australian characters in this genre.”

Another discernible theme in analysis of the route-to-reader is the role of individuals and institutions in recommending literature to the respondent. One respondent based her decision to read Heiss’ literature on recommendation from her library: “they were available via my library as an e-book and probably were on the recommended page (or maybe just under the romance category and I've read almost all of my libraries (sic) romance novels).” Another respondent who read Paris Dreaming wrote, “My mum had it on her bookshelf.”

Another dominant route-to-reader pathway is that which is mediated by authorial participation in different events and digital platforms. This includes social media, podcasts, radio interviews, writers festivals and newspaper articles. Overall, seven respondents chose to read Heiss’ chick lit based on Heiss’ media presence, and a further two were led to her chick lit after reading her memoir.

The remaining respondents were drawn to read Heiss’ chick lit based on a desire for new perspectives on Aboriginality. These reviewers are drawn to the political content
of Heiss’ work, but they are engaged in the effort to read literature by women of colour and correct a monocultural reading history. One writes that they read Heiss’ novels because they “wanted to decolonise [their] mind,” and another made the decision to read Heiss’ novels because “[she is an] Australian woman author of aboriginal background and I wanted light reading at the time.” Another respondent wrote, “I first read an Anita Heiss because I was trying to read books by non-white authors.” In addition to these reasons, the route-to-reader pathway is also discussed as serendipitous as evidenced in this response: “Manhattan Dreaming was a random selection off the shelf - I like trying out new authors and also Australian writers.”

Analysis of route-to-reader is useful in understanding the interpretative frame that readers bring to Heiss’ literature. This next section considers how these diverse interpretive frames affect the reader’s enjoyment of the novels. The survey asked respondents to qualify whether they enjoyed or did not enjoy the novels, and provide further details on why this was so. As with my analysis of Goodreads reviews, I coded route-to-reader responses in accordance with whether they employed the identifying language of chick lit, or exhibited a focus on the novels’ politics or the author. This analysis revealed a number of interesting points. Firstly, the majority of respondents indicated that they did enjoy the novels. 27 respondents enjoyed the novels with only five respondents indicating that they did not. In my analysis of survey respondents, more individuals were coded as using the language of politics and mention of the author than in
the previous analysis of Goodreads reviewers. Overall, 22 respondents used the language of politics and mentioned the author in their route-to-reader responses. Similarly, far less route-to-reader responses employed the identifying language of chick lit than in the Goodreads reviews. This discrepancy draws attention to the nature of reviewing practicing on online SRFs. Reviews on online SRFs are emotional and observably self reflexive. The nature of these reviews, however, is subject to some variance when the reviewer is subject to more directed and contextualised questioning. The survey design presented the thesis abstract to respondents and foregrounded the “political significance” of Heiss’ novels. This variance does not diminish the content of these reader views, but merely indicates the ease with which Heiss’ chick lit can be discussed through the frame of Aboriginal literature, rather than genre.

Fig. 3. Whether respondents did or did not enjoy Heiss’ chick lit
Route-to-reader and Reviewers who used the Language of Chick Lit

Of the seven respondents who discussed route-to-reader through the identifying language of chick lit; two indicated that they did not enjoy the novels. These two reviewers read *Not Meeting Mr Right* and *Manhattan Dreaming* and disliked the novels based on a perceived miscommunication of politics and genre. The respondent who read *Not Meeting Mr Right* wrote, “I found the writing very transparently preachy, with little subtlety or nuance.” The novel made a significant impression on another respondent who wrote that although they, “read this book quite a while ago so my memory is not 100% fresh…” there is a resounding impression of “annoyance” with the novel: “I do have a pretty distinct memory of being really annoyed by a lot of things like this in the novel. Every message the author wanted to convey was just really overdone or not followed up well, and to me it came odd as being preachy/having certain views without having much substance behind them.” The other respondent did not enjoy *Manhattan Dreaming* based on the fact that it was marketed by their public library as “contemporary romance” and not chick lit. They wrote, “I was expecting a contemporary romance, not a chick-lit book.” In both cases, these novels defied these reviewers’ expectations.

Overall, five respondents who used the identifying language of chick lit enjoyed the novels. Their reasons for enjoyment echo Steiner’s definition of the genre (2008). One writes that *Not Meeting Mr Right, Avoiding Mr Right* and *Manhattan Dreaming* were “fun easy reads with intelligent characters.” Another respondent wrote regarding the same
books “they were good fun books and I learned something about modern Aboriginal women.” And, another respondent wrote that Not Meeting Mr Right was “a light hearted and fun read with likeable characters.”

Route-to-reader and Reviewers who used the Language of Politics and Mention the Author

Overwhelmingly more respondents — 22 out of 34 — used the language of politics and mention of the author in their discussion of route-to-reader. Although these respondents were drawn to read Heiss’ chick lit because of its political dimension, few explicitly discussed this aspect of the novels in their responses. The majority of these responses — 20 out of 22 — indicated that they did enjoy the novels, however, most did not provide further qualification of why this was so. Seven left this section of the survey blank, a further two merely reiterated that they found Heiss’ novels “enjoyable,” and another chose to discuss Heiss’ memoir instead.

A small number of respondents did clearly articulate their enjoyment of the novels’ political dimension. One respondent who read Avoiding Mr Right, Manhattan Dreaming and Paris Dreaming wrote, “fun, light-hearted reads, dealing with more weighty topics (racism in particular) in a light-handed way.” And another who read Paris Dreaming, Not Meeting Mr Right and Avoiding Mr Right wrote that “they were fun, readable character-driven stories about people, places, and relationships that were fairly
familiar to me, from my own experience and/or other fiction (books/films) but with the added difference of featuring Aboriginal women, and great explorations of racial politics.”

The majority of the other respondents simply discussed the novels in reference to their humour and the quality of the characterisation.

Out of the 34 respondents, two identified as Indigenous Australian. Based on their personal identification with the novels’ protagonists, both respondents enjoyed the novels: “As an Aboriginal woman I identified with a lot of the themes.” And, “as an Australian woman, and an Indigenous woman, it is nice to be able to find books that actually represent me. Not just the northern stereotype. The stories are fun, relevant, interesting and culturally significant.” This respondent perfectly articulates one of Heiss’ authorial motivations; to write representations of Aboriginality that are underrepresented.

Overall, whether respondents’ route-to-reader is delineated by genre or by politics and the author, their enjoyment of the novel is not substantially affected. Readers who use the language of chick lit and readers who use the language of politics use similar language of assessment and evaluation. Both groups feature similar language in their assessment of the novels whether they enjoyed or disliked the novels. Heiss is, therefore, seemingly successful in reaching a diverse and broad reading audience who approach her work through different interpretative frames, but who largely draw comparable conclusions about whether they enjoyed her work. The significance of genre for Heiss’ work, therefore, seems mostly in the marketing of her work. As Heiss has reflected, genre is about targeting
a specific audience, however, the cogency of this frame does not seem to substantially impact the actual reading experience itself. Genre brings the reader to the page — but does not dictate the reader’s experience.

The Cultural Interface and the Question of Education

A solid majority of survey participants responded in the affirmative when asked if they found Heiss’ novels to be educational with regards to Indigenous affairs. 20 out of 34 respondents found the novels to be educational, with only ten respondents suggesting that they were not.53 It is important to note that these reviewers did not identify as Indigenous Australian.

Those that did not find the novels to be educational reached this conclusion for two primary reasons: either they did not cohere with the respondent’s understanding of Aboriginality, or they felt that the novels were not written with educational intent. One respondent, who read *Avoiding Mr Right* and *Not Meeting Mr Right*, wrote:

As I recall the books were based in an urban setting, so most of the story was very typical youngish educated female working in the big city stuff, interwoven with life as part of an Indigenous family. In that sense it was easy to relate to (as at the time of reading I was of a similar demographic but not Aboriginal).

As previously discussed, the cultural interface is the moment in which views about Indigenous people are met with representation by Indigenous people; that is, the moment

53 One respondent left this section of the survey blank.
in which Indigeneity is no longer objectified and is instead reaffirmed by Indigenous subjectivity and experience. In this instance, the reviewer locates Aboriginality as something distinct and outside of their own experience as an urban based woman. This interpretation could be reminiscent of the examples presented in Leane’s (2010) work on interpretative practices in academic classrooms, in which readers demonstrate a resistance to representations of Aboriginality outside of dominant national stereotypes. Other respondents discussed how they did not perceive the novels to be intended to educate:

> Although I think there is some I insight into the life of this particular indigenous person and her family and social group; I have read much more interesting, engaging and educational books on Indigenous people and their culture - e.g. a range of (fiction and non-fiction) books published by Magabala Books. It is my view that their is a wide variety of Indigenous cultural perspectives and that while Heiss may have profile in certain markets, there are many other indigenous authors who have at least as much, if not more, to contribute to the development of understanding and insight into Indigenous culture and affairs.

In a similar vein, another response established a comparison between her chick lit novels and her memoir, thereby indicating the distinct function of each genre.

> Not really for me - but I think I was hoping that would be the case. (I am sure "Am I black enough for you?" would teach me lots though.) That said, I think what she is doing in this genre is valuable in that she is making ethnicity secondary to the narrative - not to devalue Indigenous culture, but to make it less political and more accessible.

Further respondents simply identified any potential educational elements as secondary to the plot, or completely non-apparent. One respondent wrote, “Though there were some references to Indigenous culture, I do not remember that aspect of the novel being a main
focus, and therefore I did not find it to be educational in that respect” and another wrote, “I wasn't conscious of it.” These responses contrast with other Goodreads reviewers’ assessment of the novels as didactic or preachy. They range from a complete lack of awareness of these dimensions of the text, to an understanding that Heiss is producing some innovation in genre: “I think what she is doing in this genre is valuable.” Overall, these responses reinforce the subjective nature of reading and the distinct expectations that readers bring to the text.

Respondents who did find the novels to be educational discussed how the texts both furthered their awareness, and provided a platform for further engaging with Indigenous affairs. As written by one respondent:

About the best thing about this book was that it explicitly discussed being Indigenous. As a non-Indigenous person it definitely brought certain issues to my attention that I hadn't encountered much before that. E.g. The idea that certain people aren't "black enough" to "count" as Indigenous, that sort of thing - and the flip side of that, potential cultural appropriation by non-Indigenous people. However I remember a scene where the protagonist rejects a super white guy because he's claiming to be Indigenous - honestly am not sure how to interpret that. But at the very least the novel raised some awareness of these issues.

This respondent acknowledges that they gained some “awareness” about Aboriginality after reading Not Meeting Mr Right. In particular, this included knowledge pertaining to issues around race and class. This respondent does draw attention to the fact that the novel did not make Aboriginality totally accessible and knowable to the reader. They are left
with further questions regarding issues around Aboriginal identity. Despite this, the respondent still acknowledges the importance of the novel in highlighting this issue. Similarly, another respondent who read *Manhattan Dreaming* highlights how the novel offered some new perspectives on what it was to be an urban Aboriginal woman: “The characters were living lives similar to my own and my friends and family in many ways and it was interesting to see how their Aboriginal culture impacted on their day-to-day lives and life decisions.” This response suggests that the respondent is able to frame Aboriginality as something that is no longer distinct to the realities of urban living. In both cases, both responses highlight how these novels counter and challenge the respondent’s understandings of Aboriginality.

A number of reviews indicate that they did not learn a huge amount from the novels but still reinforce their significance. One respondent who read *Paris Dreaming* and *Avoiding Mr Right* wrote, “I didn't learn things around culture as such, but I loved how she used Indigenous culture and affairs in the plot and was able to integrate politics into the romance genre in this way.” Other respondents suggest that they were already had existent knowledge about issues discussed in the novels. One respondent who read *Avoiding Mr Right* and *Not Meeting Mr Right* wrote: “Concerns/ideas raised were already familiar as I participate as an educator in an indigenous literacy program.” Another respondent who read *Paris Dreaming* wrote “There were just some little bits of information that I didn't know or found interesting.” Another respondent admits to having
very little knowledge prior to reading Heiss novels: “I don't know much about Indigenous culture really and don't know anyone who is Indigenous (or at least, I don't know if they are - it's not something that's come up) so learning something new from fiction novels is always good.” This same respondent chose to read Heiss’ novels *Manhattan Dreaming*, *Not Meeting Mr Right* and *Avoiding Mr Right* because they were categorized as “romance” at their local library. This route-to-reader pathway, and the respondent’s further explanation that they “learnt something about modern Aboriginal women,” demonstrates that Heiss has been successful in reaching an audience “that weren’t previously engaging with Aboriginal Australia in any format” (Heiss 2012, 215).

To some extent, Bourdieu’s demarcation of the literary field, also implies distinct types of readers. Accordingly, readers of genre fiction have been theorised by Gelder (2004) as highly competent at demarcating the boundaries of the field. This understanding of the reader is formulated against a more rigid understanding of genre composed of certain formulaic elements. Reviews taken from Goodreads, and analysis of surveys conducted with respondents, however, demonstrates that the reader’s understanding of genre is more porous than that expressed in scholarship. Through analysis of reader expectations, and route-to-reader, I explored the interpretative frame that readers brought to bear on Heiss’ literature. Readers’ interpretations of Heiss’ literature was delineated by genre, by her authorial presence, and by the political dimension of the novels. Not only do these findings point to the individual and subjective nature of the reading experience in
which texts are interpreted outside of their market designation; but, this diversity complicates academic understandings of Heiss’ literature that perceive the political dimension of her novels to be in tension with the genre components of chick lit. Further, although some responses do explicitly identify Heiss’ novels as educational, these responses also suggest that Heiss’ literature operates as a medium for engaging readers with Aboriginal affairs with an emphasis on understanding, assistance and discussion. Instead of her literature being bluntly didactic, this approach is again more evocative of the language of reconciliation.
Conclusion

This thesis began with a desire to explore the social significance of Heiss’ chick lit. Although seemingly a simple proposition, this focus necessitated a complex and radically contextual approach that adequately accounted for the nexus of the author, text and reader. Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of the sociology of literature provided a powerful theoretical approach that accommodated the breadth of enquiry undertaken in this thesis. His argument that meaning cannot be located within the system of texts themselves but must be understood relationally directly inspired the tripartite structure of this thesis. And, although Bourdieu does not feature as centrally in this thesis past Chapter One, his emphasis on the social significance of literature and aversion to totalising theoretical claims informs all subsequent chapters.

Cumulatively, this thesis presents a number of important findings. First and foremost, that genre remains a more porous and elusive category than is currently presented in chick lit scholarship. Not only does this thesis demonstrate the limitations of scholarship based on a formulaic understanding of genre, but it also presents a less prescriptive understanding of the reader of chick lit. As evidenced in Chapter Four, although genre may bring the reader to the page, it does not dictate her experience or appraisal of Heiss’ novels. Indeed, these readers overwhelmingly enjoyed the political aspects of these novels that do not necessarily adhere to a formulaic understanding of the genre. Overall, what was of greater importance was the quality of writing, characterisation and storytelling than adherence to formula. From an authorial position, the cogency of genre is further brought into question.
in Chapter One in which the designation of Heiss’ novels as chick lit is discussed as a marketing decision, rather than something implicit to their internal structure.

This thesis also presents an argument for the political and social significance of Heiss’ chick lit novels. Not only are these novels significant for their complex depiction of a nascent Aboriginal middle-class, but as explored in Chapter Four, they are also successfully reaching a mainstream Australian audience who have not necessarily engaged with Indigenous affairs before. These findings contribute to the growing body of scholarship that explores the transformative power of literature as a medium of reconciliation.

The radically contextual approach presented in this thesis offers potential new directions for future research on chick lit by women of colour. An intersectional ideological reading of the novels, complemented by reader response, circumvents some of the limitations of existent scholarship that focus on the irreconcilability of race and politics with the conventions of the genre. As argued by Butler and Dessai in 2008, still more research is to be developed in this area.

Although this thesis did — to some extent — incorporate the voice of Aboriginal reviewers; further research should be conducted or attend more closely to the significance of literature by Aboriginal authors for an Aboriginal readership. As argued by Brewster in her reading of Aboriginal women’s life writing and poetry, these texts are only ever partially for a non-Aboriginal readership (2016). In Heiss’ strategising of her own approach she has consciously sought to appeal to a non-Indigenous readership, therefore, a focus on a non-
Indigenous readership and questions pertaining to how her literature challenges understandings of Indigeneity is warranted. None-the-less, the conclusions drawn may have been increasingly complicated if greater attention to an Indigenous readership was foregrounded.

This thesis has explored Heiss’ own understanding and strategising of writing into the genre of chick lit, as well as the diverse and differentiated reader expectations that have been brought to bear on her literature. Ultimately the analysis undertaken throughout this thesis confounds academic understandings of the cogency of genre as an interpretative tool and presents new possibilities for future scholarship on chick lit.
Appendix: Interview with Anita Heiss

In the interest of transparency I present the full transcript of the interview conducted with Dr. Anita Heiss on the 13\textsuperscript{th} June 2017. I have used my shorthand name of Finn, rather than Fiannuala Morgan throughout this interview.

[Following Introduction of Finn…]

\textbf{Anita:} That’s interesting, and one of your questions was this, and this is going to be a very short answer, and that is, that I don’t write Romance; romance and chick lit are very different things. And I’m happy when we get to that [question] we can talk all about that.

\textbf{Finn:} We can use these more as guides, and if you want to add anything that is great too.

\textbf{Anita:} And have you got hold of ‘Am I Black Enough for You’? So that talks about why I went into chick lit and so forth, and so, that’s all good.

\textbf{Finn:} Yes, thank you I have. So we’ll just start at the beginning! About what point you decided that you wanted to begin to write novels, I suppose?
Anita: Okay, it’s interesting; it wasn’t ever a conscious decision at all. I had done ‘Sacred Cows’ in 1996, which I thought would be a one off book, just as a response to everything on the shelves that I had had to read for university about Aboriginal Australia by non-Aboriginal people, so it was really just a reaction to that. [it was] a satirical social commentary that was no great piece of literature, I think, I don’t know, some people are embarrassed by their first book; I am. But, I was doing my PhD — I think I had already submitted my PhD or was in the process of submitting my PhD — and I was invited by Scholastic to write a kid’s novel, which is ‘Who Am I? The Diary of Mary Talence, Sydney 1937’ and it was actually a really good way of moving into writing fiction because it was a very simple format which was a diary over 12 months and so I was given the structure, given the word length, I was given the age of character and the reading audience. So all I had to do was write the story with all these guidelines; and, some people might find that those boundaries are quite strict, but for me was a great intro into moving out of non-fiction and a PhD — which is a completely different way of reading and of writing — to being creative. So, even though the content was quite intense and draining because it was about the stolen generations; the capacity that you’re given in writing — or the capacity you have to be creative — makes it joyful in this sense… That isn’t the right word (writing chick lit is joyful…) it allowed a free-er form of writing, so I really enjoyed that. So that was that (in 2001) and so from that… I think I really enjoyed that, and then I think I’d started my first chick lit — which I didn’t know was chick lit—
and we can talk about that in a minute. And it the first adult novel I wrote; because I was
reading all Georgia Blain’s ‘Closed for Winter’ and Rosie Scott’s ‘Movie Dreams’ and
‘Glory Days’ and so forth, on the beach at Maroubra, and nearly all of Linda Jaivin’s
works. And then I’m thinking, and I knew all these women, who were like mentors to me,
who had helped me, I told them about writing ‘Mary Talence’ and Linda had read the draft
and given me advice on using [senses?] and so forth, but I never saw women like myself
in Australian women’s fiction, and I thought, I had all… I don’t know where the original
idea came from; but I had this idea of wanting to do these dates from hell sort of thing,
that everybody wants to do, and [that was] ‘Not Meeting Mr Right’… I went to Bundanon,
on the Arthur Boyd estate, for 10 days and knocked over about 20,000 words, and I really
enjoyed doing that, and that was released in 2007. It did really well really quickly and was
optioned for TV, and within six weeks the publishers said we need another book and I
went to do ‘Avoiding Mr Right’ and chose to set it in Melbourne, because I was very
conscious of markets and audiences. And, _Not Meeting Mr Right_ was set in Sydney, [but]
Melbourne was a completely different story, and then that did even better than ‘Not
Meeting Mr Right,’ and then they wanted a two book idea. So that [‘Avoiding Mr Right’]
came out in 2008 and then in 2009 I was in New York and I had the idea for ‘Manhattan
Dreaming’ and they rang and said, ‘well we want two books’ so then I was like, ‘where
else do I want to research? Oh Paris!’ So that’s how that all came about.
**Finn:** It sounds like the ‘Diary of Mary Talence’, then even the format of the chick lit books, which are kind of diaries and emails these almost seem like a good progression out of the discipline of a PhD and that kind of structure?

**Anita:** Well, what happens is your brain just functions completely differently, and I’ve been out of Academia now for some time and so even when I go and do a guest lecture now, it’s quite...I don’t have that brain anymore, because it’s completely different. Every time I get asked to speak about something I have to try and make it something creative or weave in, you know, creative works because that’s how I’m conditioned now. And I will say it’s in a different way fulfilling, because academia stifles my capacity to be creative because it’s the nature of the establishment and the space you work in everyday. Some people thrive in it and I didn’t really.

**Finn:** Do you mean because you have more space now, that you’re kind of your own boss, so you can develop what you want? Or, feel that there was pressures institutionally?

**Anita:** Language is one, it’s a completely different language, it’s like working in the public service or wherever there’s bureaucratese and there’s legalese [...] ... And, the style of voice is very different. And, when I was at university — even though I was doing creative writing as an aside — I never... In those days you didn’t get points for it in
Academia, there were no points given, you had to publish in literary journals, so even though I had a novel out it wasn’t credited in the big scheme of things, which is a bit different now I understand. So I thought, well I know that was problematic, particularly because I worked in a university that taught creative writing and so forth, but I understand that has changed now, actually the whole nature has changed. I’ve just got a post-doc at Canberra Uni and that is involves doing a literacy project in writing a book with kids in a remote community which I don’t think would have happened back in the day when I was doing — my PhD and so forth…15, 16 years ago…17 years ago… 20 years ago! 1996; it was very, very different.

**Finn:** Fabulous, thank you. So, you’ve already answered my second question, and the second half of the second question, and the third question… And the fourth!

**Anita:** But the second question, ‘why did I choose?’ … Oh no I can talk a little bit more about that because, the thing is, after writing ‘Not Meeting Mr Right’, I thought that it might just be one book, but when I realized it was so successful… what I wanted to do then — now [that] I’d made this conscious decision to reach this broad audience of Australian women who are on the bus or at the beach or in books clubs who may never have read a book by an Aboriginal author before, and there were far fewer on the list back then than there are now, although I think I’m still the only Aboriginal author who writes
commercial fiction, as opposed to literary fiction… which is another debate because its all fiction! But I wanted to… There’s not enough of us to sustain marketing/publishing… and I go… well, ‘I don’t want to spend a year or two years or, however, long writing a book that three people read. What is the point of that exercise?’ And, I sit around dinner tables — because most of my friends are writers — and I can sit at a dinner table with brilliant award winning literary authors who might sell a thousand books, and I sell 15,000… and it’s not about the sales…well, it is about the sale! For every sale someone is reading it, and so I go ‘how do I take a message about black deaths in custody or the NT intervention or cultural appropriation and make it palatable or relatable in an everyday story for Australian women to read?’ and that’s why I started going well, lets write about relationships, what have we got in common? Our friendships our relationships our mothers and so forth, and so, it was a conscious decision to write stories for that market to reach them on issues that as an Australian woman, who is Aboriginal, thinks that all Australians should be talking about. But what’s interesting is, when it was reviewed by academics its like, oh you know… I accused of dumbing down my work and so forth. It wasn’t, I wasn’t —it was actually an intelligent marketing move, but also the novels then became the springboard for me to have greater conversations in that space, because at some universities they do study women’s writing and that meant that those groups were reading about, not just relationships and women’s stories [but] women’s stories that hadn’t been considered necessarily before in terms of Aboriginal women….And, the other thing
was…Oh! Interestingly — this is an aside — when the memoir came out someone here in Brisbane said to me, and this is someone who’s very close to me and loves me, in the industry: ‘oh, you’ve got some much more kudos now, because you wrote a memoir.’ So that really gave me the shits, I didn’t write that to get literary kudos! I [already] had four books that had sold really, really well but there is this whole hierarchy and chick lit is at the bottom of that list, just above Westerns…that no-one writes anymore.

Finn: That’s great. Because what I did want to ask you about, because part of what I’m looking at is developing area in scholarship, in Academia, about chick lit novels, that there seems to be this sense where academics don’t know how to bring these novels into the institution, and an argument that you can’t bring them in through literature because they don’t meet this specific metrics that’s held up in conventional literary studies — so, the analysis is done in this other way which often talks about specifically formula…

Anita: Right

Finn: …And adherence to formula or deviation from formula, and what seems to be occurring is that chick lit novels by women of color are held to this different standard, in which they’re always talked about as implicitly ‘different’ [from an assumed white ‘normative’ protagonist]. So I was wondering…
Anita: On that really quickly, did you know you can go into Austlit and see which books are taught where? So you go into Austlit and just say you search ‘Anita Heiss’ and I think on the left hand, down the side, It’ll say ‘Australian Curriculum’ and you can click on what books are taught by what institutions over the past years. So that’s a really good indicator to see which universities cover what texts. Because, I talk about indigenous literature broadly and I often can say to people ‘you know just so you know Kath Walker or Alexis Wright, or whoever, is being taught or has been taught at Melbourne,’ or wherever, so I think that’s a good indication to see which university, particularly if they’re teaching creative writing, [generally what books are being taught]. The other thing was….What did you just say?

Finn: Formula…?

Anita: Formula! So first, the first review I think or one of the first reviews of ‘Not Meeting Mr Right’ was in the ‘Sydney Morning Herald’ and ‘Spectrum’ and it was by a man — middle class white guy — who was not the target audience obviously, and he made some comment about how this was ‘formulaic’ and I was like, ‘well yes it is!’ chick lit or lots of writing is formulaic [but] it’s how you use the formula. For me it was how I used the formula to get the message across and this goes onto one of your later questions
— but I never read chick lit, I didn’t know I was writing chick lit until I met with my publisher at the time at Random House, and she used to be a buyer for Dymocks … I met her in 1998 when she was a buyer for Dymocks and she bought… I self-published a book of poetry and she bought 200 copies for Dymocks which was unheard of, and put it on the cover of the monthly June or whatever newsletter thing and so I met with her and she showed me the cover [‘Not Meeting Mr Right’], there’d been like 29 versions of the cover and she said, ‘Anita, the women who buy these books know what they’re looking for, they’ll look, they’ll go in the shop and they don’t know specifically the title or the author [but] they will look for a book that looks like the one that they just read and they,’ …and she said, ‘they usually [have] these pastels colours and stuff,’ so when they were doing the cover of ‘Not Meeting Mr Right’ they sent the synopsis with the top 15 best selling book covers of the best selling books in that genre for the year, it might have been international, and took those covers to the designer with my synopsis and said, ‘here’s the story, make it look something like that!’ So there’s a whole formula around that, and like I said I didn’t know I was writing chick lit, I just wanted to write this story, but then sales department and marketing departments they determine the genre because they’re the ones who have to go into the book shop to sell them.
**Finn:** That’s so interesting that genre [is] almost secondary; it’s something which comes after the story [but] it’s another way of seemingly getting it to the audience that you’re already thinking of.

**Anita:** Well…that leads to one of your other questions and that’s true, I think you were asking, ‘does genre matter?’ And I thought — I never really thought — I never concern myself with it and many writers will say the same thing; that they just write, but the reality is I get many of my contracts on a synopsis so if I have an idea I give them a page and they’ll give me a contract. So I don’t write and then hope someone will buy it because I don’t have the time to do that; I need to know that there’s going to be a published book at the end and I need some money to do research. So genre in that way, I actually, I appreciate that genre is about targeting — as you said — a particular audience, so my latest book ‘Our Race for Reconciliation’ that is middle/upper primary [and] I know the readers are going to be about 8-10 year old; depending on literacy they could be a bit older and of course adults will read them as well, but the whole focus of the language and the level of intellect for the characters had is based on the genre that it sits in which is a kids novel that’s historical fiction; its kids novel.
Finn: Yeah, no that’s great, so you have the idea of a message that you want to deliver? And, then the genre or the frame comes around it afterwards?

Anita: Yes!

Finn: Okay, thanks! Gosh, you’ve got through so many of them! Oh, maybe I will ask about ‘Barbed Wire and Cherry Blossoms.’ I think I asked you a question about that at the Melbourne Writers Festival

Anita: Did you? In what room? Was that the afternoon one?

Finn: Stan Grant was supposed to be with you?

Anita: Oh yeah, sick, yes.

Finn: That one! I think I asked a genre related question at that one too! A lot of that book, and that’s a historical novel…You spoke at the writers festival about wanting to set a story in Cowra, a story that was about where you were from, is that out of an ethical imperative?
Anita: Well there are a couple of things — that’s a good question — there’s a couple of things around that. And that is, the publisher wanted another book. I had no idea what I was just going to do, I normally have my ideas, I think ‘Tiddas’ had been out a month, no six months or something, and I was leaving the country and I got an email or a phone-call from my agent saying Scholastic …not Scholastic… Simon and Schuster, would like another book, have you got any ideas? And I said, ‘oh no’, I had these really vague thoughts of old [folks?] sitting on a veranda somewhere with cups of tea and this time-lapse, but I don’t even know how you would make that work on the page because I’m a very simplistic writer. Its all very lineal and very basic and my argument for that is that I’m trying to simplify complex moments in time and complex issues and not make it even more difficult by creating a more difficult story to read. So, anyway I go to Hawaii and then I’m at Pearl Harbour and I’d been there three times and it was the first time I really watched the Japanese tourists. Most of the tourists at Pearl Harbour are Japanese tourists and obviously the way in which…have you been there?

Finn: No, but I’d love to.

Anita: Well its kind of extraordinary, because obviously the way in which the Americans tell any version of their history, even though it’s a shared history, its very — I don’t know — ‘propaganda-ish’ with you, full on. So anyway, I was watching how people were quite
calm and watching history that their ancestors were part of, and I thought, it made me think about Cowra and the break out and our history — how history hadn’t talked much about the break out and it had not mentioned Aboriginal people at all, so I go ‘this is my story!’ I want to write this dual history, this shared space. But it was interesting because I had already written some Wiradjuri characters. Now my mother was born on Erambie Station at Corwa, all her siblings were born at Brungle mission [and I have] family in Wagga and so forth. So I have a character in Mudgee for ‘Manhattan Dreaming’ and there was a Wiradjuri character for ...No, Mudgee was ‘Tiddas.’ Three characters were Mudgee, ‘Manhattan Dreaming’ the character was from Bathurst, not Bathurst, Goulburn; the Big Marino. Sorry, I get all confused. So I thought at some point I need to write something, I can’t keep dancing around where my family are from, but it had to be the right story and the right time. So it started [when] I released a kids book set in Cowra called ‘Harrys Secret,’ so I spent time there and that was a really good segue into showing the community that I could involve the community and this could be a story for that local town for black and white. And, so that that was released in October in 2015, I think, the mayor launched that at the school and the kids acted it out and it was front page of The Guardian and so that was a really nice way to say I want to do things for this town, even though I don’t live here, but my history is here as well. Cowra is not a big enough audience to sustain that publisher project, [but] at the end of the day the only people I was worried about in terms of that book was that town.
**Finn:** Thank you for that, it seems… With discussing delivering very complex difficult histories in a form that will make the readable and enjoyable, it seems a lot to undertake, to have all those things in mind and also Australian history but… Can you still hear me, oh no! [audio ends] … Hello? That was our requisite technological difficulty. …I was just asking about your mission or the desire to deliver complex ideas in this simplistic and enjoyable way, how much is …

**Anita:** Oh, I can’t see you any more… What was the question?…

**Finn:** Just about, delivering complex stories in a relatable and enjoyable manner and that book undertaking a lot in terms of discussing Australian history but then also dual history of the Second World War and obviously a Japanese [history] as well, so I’m not sure what my question there is so much… because all of your books, deliver a lot of complex ideas in an enjoyable way but that book is perhaps doing more…

**Anita:** Oh, I hope so. Having all these storylines you don’t realize until people read them, and see a whole lot of things, I just wanted to write about their Mission and life and history and so forth, and then people see all these other messages in there. For instance, that family tree [with] Hiroshi who is this single solo person, and they treat him with respect as a man,
as opposed to the way the media in the town thought about all Japanese [as though] they were bad; the Yellow Peril and all that sort of thing [but] they just saw this person and treated him as an individual. So, when the book came out the link was made that this was what we do with Muslims for instance. And its going…Meeting a Muslim or seeing us on the street or news and saying ‘treat them as an individual’ like we treat everyone else. We just automatically go ‘all Muslims are terrorists’ and so forth. So there’s that, but also the treatment of the POWs versus the treatment of Aboriginal people under the Act of Protection, and also… The first journalist that interviewed me linked it to treatment of asylum seekers and so forth, and then we had the treatment of kids in detention in Don Dale and all of a sudden the questions are sort of, ‘what have we learnt through your novel, what can we say we’ve learnt from history?’ and I was like, ‘well, not very much.’ We’ve gone backwards in terms of human rights and treatment of human beings, and so forth, and we’re treating kids in detention worse than we treated POWs. Don’t get me wrong we treated POWs the way we should have treated them, they ate well, and so forth, and they had medical attention; but all these things that you don’t intend to when you’re writing the novel seem to set off alarm bells — you send your readers on other tangents, which is a good thing.

**Finn:** It has so much contemporary resonance, and I suppose that’s what literature is, it forces us to reconsider and learn and think.
Anita: I hope so, that’s the purpose.

Finn: I was just going to touch on something you mentioned earlier; your writing process, and your relationship with your publishers. You’re bringing out a novel every year and it has made it very difficult to write research on you because there’s always new stuff coming out! Which is great, but it seems like your held to this, that you have to be consistent? Or bringing out books consistently is about your readership? And knowing that you have a loyal reader base now? Or is that simply the nature or the economic imperative of being an author as well?

Anita: Well, there’s a couple of things there, so the first year when I did the chick lit, the publishers said, ‘you have to have one every year because people expect that,’ and that made absolute sense, it was a lot of pressure, but it made sense. And, ‘Avoiding Mr Right’ is one of my most popular books in public libraries, which is interesting, and I take research very seriously, I spend more time researching pretty much than I do writing, so I was really happy with those four books that I did, but I pretty much had done all I could do in that space which is why I moved into ‘Tiddas,’ and I had to think about what was the next challenge for me as a writer. And, it was more vocabulary, and I write linearly, and so the challenge for that was to have five main characters and voices, and so that also
gave me five different ways to approach similar topics because the characters are a microcosm of the larger society, and although they’re ‘lefties,’ but still there’s non-Indigenous and Indigenous and people who view things differently.

But the other thing was, I had publishers come to me and say, ‘we want something.’ So they came to me last year and they go, they want me to do a Michael O’Loughlin kids book, and I had this idea about doing Adam Goodes and Michael together and literally that was a done deal on the spot. And then Scholastic wanted to have…I don’t have a very good relationship… Oh not a good relationship, but I don’t like them as a publisher, they don’t to nurture [authors?] because they just sell straight into schools, and I sell really well for them, so the book just came out ‘Race for Reconciliation’ — 4000 copies in a month, and you know, my friends dream about selling those number but for me its not just about the numbers, if you’re a professional writer you need to have a healthy relationship with your publisher and you need to feel that they have your back. It’s not just about churning out books because I say, ‘they’re not just books, they’re cultural products,’ and I’m trying to create something that has lasting life and will be used in classrooms to generate conversation and help people understand their role in society. Writers hold mirrors up to society. So some of it is about being approached and some of it is about, I think, all of them. Black Inc. have recently approached me and last year and I said, ‘no more projects no more projects.’ Because I have a job, and I’m just tired, like its exhausting, I want to have some weekends off and I don’t want to get up at 5 o clock in the morning and write.
**Finn:** That’s so impressive!

**Anita:** Well no, that was just when I had to get that kids novel in, because I just go, ‘2000 words a day for 20 days in November,’ and then I handed it in in December. And I would go, ‘Oh I start tomorrow, I start tomorrow,’ and then of course, I had to write 8000 words one weekend. But I really enjoyed doing it, so it’s not a complaint, it’s about managing time. So some of it is about the publisher, they will say they want something, and so, just recently I’ve… we’ve got a book being shopped around with Valerie Parv. So she has sold — she lives in Young in NSW — over 30 million books worldwide as a romance writer! So, yes ‘The Outback Code’, [that was] the last book that came out, so we are working on a project together but it’s being knocked back by every publishing house in Australia. It’s with Harlequin New York now, I don’t really want to write a Romance but get my foot in the door in the US, and I don’t know how to write Romance, anyway, so it is what it is, it’s being pitched as Romance I think, so that’s one project. But when I met with my publisher for Simon and Schuster in New York, she said they had knocked it back, but, ‘I’ve got another idea for you!’ When do I have a year off!? But she says, ‘I think you could write this Epic historical novel, nobody’s doing this!’ And then I go, ‘okay, well I’ll think about it, I’ll think about it, maybe in two years…’ I want a year off writing, so I can just spend a year researching. I was away, I had a mental health week last week because
I was so exhausted, and [ was talking] about where my mother went to school at the
Brungle Mission’s school, and next door to Brungle is a town called Haroldtown?...
Grahamstown! And, so I was just like, ‘I wonder who Graeme is?’ So, I start to get some
ideas, so I thought, ‘maybe I could do this.’ And, that would be good because I have all
this family in Brungle, although it’s a tiny tiny little community, and there’s Wiradjuri
cemetery there where all my family is buried. I was there at Christmas time for new
headstones for my grandparents and cousins and so forth and they were like, ‘why don’t
you do a book set in Brungle?’ And I thought this is the book! I don’t what the story is
yet, but I know, see for me, the two main things are setting and characters, if I can nail the
setting. And I go, ‘right ‘and do it there, and put Brungle on the map, I don’t know what
the story is yet, but I think I’ve got the seeds of something that potentially [could work].
But other than that, usually, the idea comes, it’s always triggered by something else.

**Finn:** Well, I think an Epic Australian historical drama would be fabulous because I’ve
just started reading these Australian romance authors more recently, but a lot of them are
Historical Romances — they don’t even seem like Romances to be honest — but that’s
the way they’re packaged again, but they are so interesting, but I would love to read an
Australian Epic!!!
Anita: I think I need to come up with a story. Maybe going out there, it was like going to Hawaii, where the story presented itself, so maybe I’ll go, I haven’t been out there since January, maybe. I’ll take a trip out there and then the story will present itself.

Finn: And that could be good with the way you work too? With history, I mean, obviously it’s still creative, but you can put together structure from that research. There was something I was going to come back to you and ask about — as we’ve been speaking about the message of your literature, you mentioned that people gave you more ‘kudos’ with your memoir than perhaps with respect to your fiction, but it sounds like with you talking, that it’s the same message, but there are different responses for fiction versus non-fiction.

Anita: I think, you know, in the classroom…So, I wrote ‘Am I Black Enough For You’ for an education market. I go into a classroom all the time and the level of understanding is quite… diverse…And then I thought… And then obviously I had the Bolt case, and thought, ‘maybe if I write, had written this memoir earlier and people knew had more knowledge, that it wouldn’t have been as traumatic or as verbally violent as it was,’ but you know, maybe not, because the people who needed to read it wouldn’t have read it. So they are very very similar messages but for a different audience, but interestingly the memoir sold half of what the chick lit did but it is taught on a legal course, so I have to
have a look in Austlit, so it has been taught at universities and in Australian Studies and it has been published in the US.

**Finn:** I’ll look that up, on the Austlit and see.

**Anita:** Because they’re interesting things for [research], just to do a comparison between, you know, what’s taught.

**Finn:** Yes; no that’s a really good point.

**Anita:** I had a conversation with a poet recently who is quite down on Academia and you know: ‘it hasn’t done anything for me,’ and I had to say, ‘you need to stop saying that, because there are people working in universities who are teaching your work.’ And you go and have a look, and you know, if you win an award it is usually a university award and you know universities they’re probably the biggest buyers of your books and are actually reading them and talking about them. So you can criticise universities but that’s where the conversations are happening, particularly with poetry, its not happening in book clubs necessarily or on the beach.
Finn: I completely agree, especially being a university student but also a student of literature in an institution like Melbourne, which is a group of 8. Having a diversity of different courses which teach very different things; being able to read contemporary literature which deals with very contemporary resonant themes versus .... I liked in your memoir where you mentioned doing the Chaucer subject because I had a similar experience in my Honours year...

Anita: like, what’s the point?

Finn: And I did pretty badly, because I couldn’t understand it! [laughs].

Anita: I mean what is the point? Anyway, its fine.

Finn: So I think that’s very powerful, students now with the university structure often go onto further graduate study in law or whatever else, and it is transformative I think for students. Having taught at university as well, these kinds of things do stay with hem.

Anita: I hope so, I mean I remember specific… I mean, I went and did my undergrad… I did my PhD 20 years ago, so my undergrad was… I don’t know 25 years or… No longer? Shit….30 years ago! So my memories… I remember certain things but I cant remember
what I learnt in Australian Government for instance, so we remember what’s, you know..?

Even when I talk I just want people to walk out of the room having learnt one thing, otherwise it’s a waste of time me being there, that’s my goal.

**Finn:** Maybe on that point, I think the power of literature is that you do get this empathic connection with protagonists and that can be very personally illuminating and transformative and in some of the academic literature on your work, it discusses your fiction books being ‘educational’ for a white reader, and I was just wondering what you thought about the premise of your literature being purely ‘educational’ rather than maybe being discussed in a different way?

**Anita:** I mean, that doesn’t bother me, I mean as long as its not a criticism, I don’t want it to be, what’s the word..? ‘Didactic.’ I want it to be entertaining, as well as educational. But really, well the kids books ‘Our Race for Reconciliation,’ I didn’t want to call it that, I wanted to call it ‘Flash Black Gordon’ because her names Mel Gordon and she’s a runner and she’s like Gordon: ‘No, you got to call it this, because its targeted at teachers.’ So then there’s a whole science around the marketing of that and it is for the educational market and it is meant to be educational, but I want kids to read it and enjoy the read not just read it because they have to read it. And [I] want them to learn things, but I want all my books to teach in some way, I mean, I don’t want to waste trees! You know, there’s a purpose,
and yes I want people to be entertained and I want readers to go ‘oh I’m just like she is’ or if people go, ‘I dated him’ and it’s a character I made up. But I do want people to learn, or reflect, if not learn. Reflect on a conversation they may have had or a conversation that they should.

**Finn:** Did you ever read, ‘Tinderella’ Per chance?

**Anita:** I’ve heard of it. I’ve read like two books this year, because, I just, don’t have time. I’m reading submissions now for ‘Growing Up Aboriginal’ but I want to, next year I just want to read for fun!

**Finn:** I empathise, I don’t have the output that you have, but when you’re doing a thesis I always feel like I’m cheating on my thesis with other books if I’m trying to read something else.

**Anita:** Well that’s right, it’ll be like that til you finish.

**Finn:** Well, God willing soon. I mean, I think you’ve just about covered…
Anita: I’ll tell you what I’ll do, if you type that up and get it to me in the next few days, I’ll read it on the plane and I will type in anything I also think [is relevant].

Finn: That’s fabulous, you have given me more than I could’ve hoped for.

Anita: So, that’s only a few thousand words isn’t it?

Finn: Yes, I reckon.

Anita: And then I’ll read that on the plane or in the library in Alice Springs and I’ll just add in anything else that I wish to have said.

Finn: Yes absolutely, any changes that you want to make, anything else. Because it would be for the thesis because it is not a straight literature thesis, its quite …maybe over ambitious, but trying to capture all these facets of the book the author the reader..

Anita: No that’s, I don’t know if you’ve seen my PhD? But that was based on interviews with publishers and authors. So that was also about everything that I’d read about Aboriginal literature that was basically by non-Aboriginal people who had done desktop analysis of their work [who were] like, ‘Alexis Wright obviously means this’… And I go,
‘well how do you know that? Did you ask her? That might not have been be what she meant at all.’ But, I’m going to have to go lovely I’ve got messages flying everywhere, so you email that to me when its done and I’ll get back to you, soon as I can.

**Finn:** Thank you so much, for speaking with me.

**Anita:** Good luck with it.

**Finn:** Well I’ll send it to you at the end. If you want to name it, If you want to give it a good name? [laughs].

**Anita:** For the chapter? But, you’re not just doing my work though are you?

**Finn:** Oh yes, because its a short thesis and there’s more than enough for all your work!

**Anita:** All right well we’ll see.

**Finn:** Well I’ll send that to you at the end. Bye.

**Anita:** Bye, bye.
[End interview…]
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