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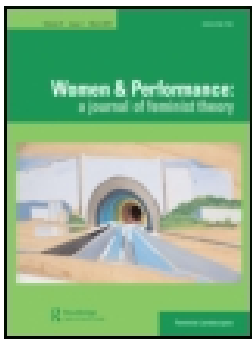
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## Pornographic encounters and interpretative interventions: Vanessa del Rio: Fifty Years of Slightly Slutty Behavior

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## Pornographic encounters and interpretative interventions: *Vanessa del Rio: Fifty Years of Slightly Slutty Behavior*

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Using the auto/biography, *Vanessa del Rio: Fifty Years of Slightly Slutty Behavior* as the primary text, this paper investigates how an embodied understanding of race and class alters our understanding of gendered experiences of violence and pleasure. It asks: what happens when the life experiences of an aging Afro-Latina porn star are positioned at the very heart of feminist investigations into the relationship between sexual experience and knowledge production? In the process, this paper reflects on how images and text function as complicated triggers for the attachments, identifications, desires, and traumas of our own corporeal embodiments and sexual histories.

**Keywords:** pornography; Latina; sexuality; sexual violence; auto/biography; sexual pleasure; masochism

The book *Vanessa del Rio: Fifty Years of Slightly Slutty Behavior* (2010), defies understandings of literary genres and racialized sexualities, demanding the kind of lingering in uncertainty that *latinidad* itself registers.<sup>1</sup> This chronicle of the life of an Afro-Latina adult-film icon simultaneously intimates and distorts the conventions of autobiography, documentary, *testimonio*, and pornography to unsettle assumptions about Latina sexuality and feminist interpretive practices. It is a mammoth tome, weighing in at over six pounds and containing 326 glossy pages.<sup>2</sup> It includes images from adult magazines, movie posters, films, and photographs from her private collection; text transcribed from interviews conducted both on and off camera; memorabilia spanning her childhood to the present day; and a 140-minute DVD that includes an on-camera interview, a few “day-in-the-life” scenes that follow the contemporary Vanessa del Rio through the streets of her New York, and numerous clips from her many pornographic films.

Whether or not the name Vanessa del Rio is familiar to you, it already registers a certain proximity to the worlds in which race and pornography intersect.<sup>3</sup> The only child of a Puerto Rican mother and a philandering Afro-Cuban father, Vanessa was born Ana María Sanchez on 31 March 1952. She grew up on 111th Street in Harlem and attended Catholic school before leaving home in her teens to venture out into the New York City of the 1970s, a

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world flavored with all the possibilities that sexual liberation, civil rights, and drugs seemed to promise. Vanessa del Rio was and is huge – legendary even – not because she starred in many films (the pervasive racism of the film industry meant she rarely received top billing) but because in the world of adult entertainment, during the golden age of pornography, Vanessa del Rio was a star. Black, Latina, and always glamorous, she was dubbed “our Marilyn” by her many Uptown fans. While a few African-American, Asian, and Latino men and women passed through these early years of the porn industry, none developed the name recognition of Vanessa del Rio. Del Rio worked steadily in pornographic films from 1974 until 1985, appearing in over 100 films, yet she was rarely offered starring roles, playing instead the maid, the hooker, or the Latina spitfire, her racialized difference feeding seemingly endless appetites for forbidden fruit.<sup>4</sup> Despite the roles she was offered, del Rio always brought her own brand of Latina glamour to the racial caricatures she was paid to play: lips and nails done in crimson red, makeup always flawless, cleavage and shoes always poised to attract attention, attesting to Marcia Ochoa’s assertion that “glamour allows its practitioners to conjure a contingent space of being and belonging” (2014, 89). In every role she was given, del Rio performed star, even before she was one, conjuring an alternate universe in which a young Afro-Latina from Harlem could become an international porn sensation. Before retiring from adult films in 1985 in response to her own fears of AIDS, her fame was undisputed and she did a series of pornographic films in which she simply played herself.<sup>5</sup> After her retirement, many of her previous performances began to be edited together and reissued as compilations, and previous films were retitled to profit from her popularity.<sup>6</sup> Today she hosts her own X-rated porn site and e-Bay site specializing in signed collectibles. As a public figure, she frequently appears at adult conventions to sign photos and books and has also appeared in minor television roles and in a few hip-hop music videos. And 30 years after she last appeared in an adult feature, she remains an icon.<sup>7</sup>

This paper, however is not about the history of racialized pornography or an analysis of how race, gender, and sexuality come together in these films: I will leave those invaluable academic efforts in the capable hands of scholars like Mireille Miller-Young (2014), author of *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*, or Jennifer Nash’s (2014) imprint *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*.<sup>8</sup> Instead, I am interested in older, less precise questions that have preoccupied feminist academics for generations: How do we understand experience? How does an embodied understanding of race, sexuality, and gender as performative practices alter what we might know about experience, and how does an engagement with aesthetics complicate how we might feel about it? More to the point, what happens when the life experiences of an aging bisexual Afro-Latina porn star are positioned at the very heart of feminist investigations into the relationship between experience and knowledge production? Unlike other textual accounts of life stories, or cinematic biographical recreations, here the graphic presence of the contemporary speaking subject imposes its own interpretive power through the visualization of documentary. But in combining biographical documentary with pornography, something else is also ignited.

### **Testimonio, documentary, porn**

It is well understood that visual images have the uncanny ability to transfer affect, from the moment of their production to the moment of their reception. In the pornographic image,

when what is depicted is sex, that affective charge is activated through its encounter with our own sexual archives of feeling. In this essay, I want to allow a space to register what that affective difference might open up or foreclose, not about the text per se but about the very act of interpretation. Thinking experience through queer *latinidad*, through the life story of a porn star, through the shifting textual, photographic, and cinematic traces of racialized sexuality, accentuates the buried tensions between lived experiences and the theories we might use to account for them. Equally as intimidating, it requires that we acknowledge how our own racialized archives of feeling, of gendered embodiment, and sexualized attachments animate and unsettle our scholarly practices.

It was these questions that led me to a consideration of *testimonio* as an analytical lens, that hybridized genre that captures elements of the legal discourse of testimony, the African American tradition of testifying, and the particularly Latin American genre of life story as evidence in the public claim for human rights.<sup>9</sup> Reading *Fifty Years* as *testimonio* makes salient the racialized sexual politics that undergird del Rio's story, as it illuminates aspects of the text that complicate an already complicated genre. Following John Beverly's foundational work on *testimonio*, we might argue that as a woman of color in the sex industry – in addition to appearing in pornographic films, del Rio also worked as a stripper, escort, and streetwalker – her life story exists at the margins of literature, excluded from authorized representations of Latina sexuality. Her sex-laden text certainly functions as an “extraliterary or even antiliterary form of discourse” (Beverly 1993, 84). Furthermore, like other notable *testimonios*, del Rio could be said to use her life story to promote a fuller understanding of a community and a history that has been erased from public discourse, to make a claim for the human rights of sex workers. And her text is replete with instances of sexual violence, police harassment, and abuse that evidence this as an urgent political project. Like many working in the various sectors of the sex industry, in this text del Rio recounts the numerous times she was arrested and jailed, and speaks of the hypocrisy, futility, and harm of laws that criminalize consensual adult sex work.<sup>10</sup>

Similar to other *testimonios*, del Rio's life story is narrated in the familiar “as told to” format. However, rather than an anthropologist or an enlightened intellectual, the interviewer, editor, and transcriber in this case, Dian Hanson, is herself a longtime regular in the adult-publishing world, having worked not only as an actress in adult films, but also as the editor of such titles as *Jiggs* and *Big Butt* magazines and now as the editor for Taschen's Sexy Books series. Taschen, a German publisher that specializes in art, architecture, and pop culture is best known for producing over-sized collector-edition volumes by such notable photographers as Annie Leibovitz and Helmut Newton, and coffee-table standards of French Impressionists, and mid-century design. Their Sexy Books catalogue speaks to the mainstreaming of pornography and includes books on *Tom of Finland* (Hanson 2009), Japanese bondage, and the *Big Book of Breasts* (Hanson 2011), which comes complete with 3-D glasses. This framing within the world of publishing situates del Rio's text, not as *testimonio* or even autobiography, but as art, as visual object, as living-room adornment. Here, rather than 3-D glasses, the 140-minute DVD included with *50 Years* (Figure 1) functions as its special marketing feature that augments the static photographic images of the text.

Like some other Taschen art books, *Vanessa del Rio: Fifty Years of Slightly Slutty Behavior* is available in multiple formats: a trade version that sells for US\$59.99, and two limited-edition formats, one that retails for US\$700, and another that goes for an astounding

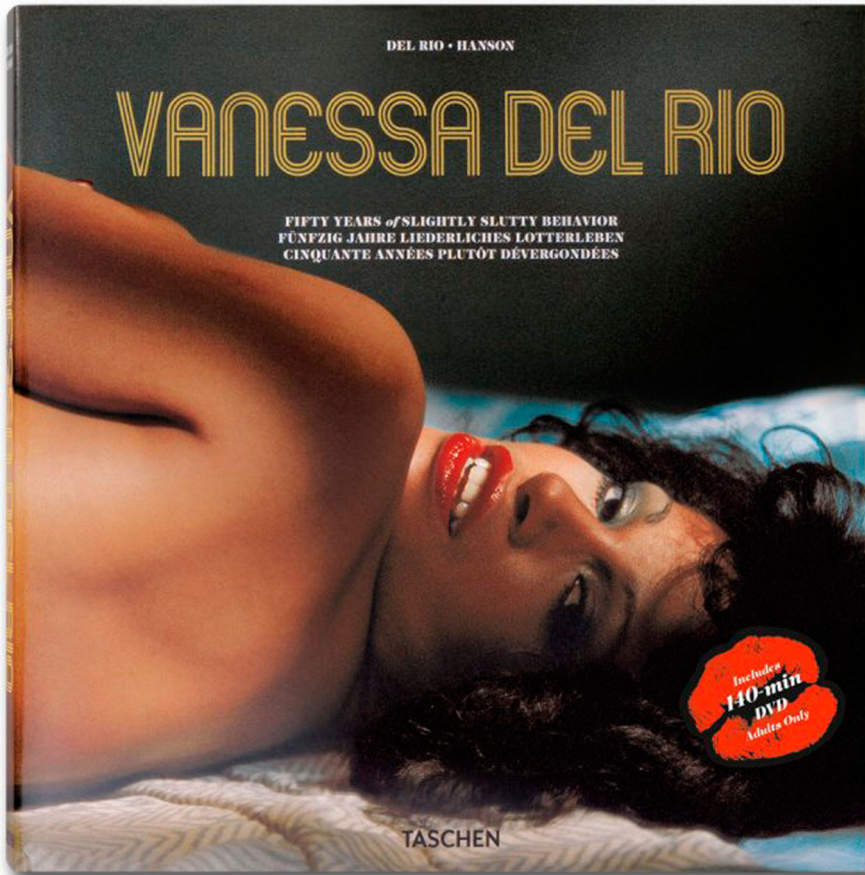


Figure 1. Book Cover with sticker announcing “140-min DVD.”

US\$1800 and includes a signed print and a chance to spend an evening with the star herself. All include over 300 glossy, image-rich pages documenting Vanessa’s life on and off screen. The book and the DVD cover much of the same material, and many of the taped interviews are unfaithfully transcribed in the book, revealing the seams of post-production editing.<sup>11</sup> In both, del Rio narrates her childhood as a young Latina growing up in Harlem, her life in the white-dominated adult-film industry, and her current career as a pop-culture icon. And both contain sizable chunks of what can only be described as hardcore pornography. Unapologetically sexual, over the course of the project del Rio describes the countless adventures and misadventures of her life in the sex industry. She also opines on how to deliver a great blowjob, the current state of the porn industry, and the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church. What remains constant throughout the text is del Rio’s unflinching investment in shaping the interpretation of her life story, particularly with regards to her sexual agency.

### Authorizing subjects

In *50 Years of Slightly Slutty Behavior*, del Rio is presented as both a visual object, whose body and sexuality is available for our ocular consumption, and as an authorizing subject, who is enlisted to interpret the narratives she herself provides. These shifts between one kind of visual encounter – porn, and another – the speaking subject of documentary, require that viewers who might wish to revel unproblematically in the pornographic gaze bear witness to the stories of racism, violence, criminalization, and racialized feminine desire that also form part of the narrative.<sup>12</sup> Equally as important from a feminist-studies perspective, it requires those interested in accessing the biographical details of this Afro-Latina icon to confront the explicit rawness of the pornographic image, and del Rio's own accounts of herself. In many ways, the DVD and the pervasive technology of digital capture wholly undercuts the genre of *testimonio*; no longer is the imagined “voiceless” subject of *testimonio* dependent on a literate intermediary to convey their message to the larger public. Like *Subcomandante Marcos*, like protesters in Greece, Ferguson, or Iguala, Mexico those wishing to broadcast their stories to a global audience just need to upload their “truth” onto YouTube, and the more sophisticated cinematic genre of documentary, made possible in part by technological access, is increasingly becoming a central feature of how we learn about the world. Nevertheless, today as publics are inundated with the visual packaging of life stories in reality television, tell-all biographies, and cinematic political propaganda, the imagined veracity of biographical documentary, like that of its textual counterpart, is rarely accepted as a given, understood instead as a cultural product mediated and designed to construct a narrative out of the “real,” to frame experience in the shape of meaning.

In many ways, Vanessa del Rio personifies the aggressive racialized woman who sees something or someone and goes for it, an image she is invested in controlling and promoting – even now. Several times throughout the book, she credits Isabel Sarli (Figure 2), the Argentinean actress of the 1950s and 1960s, as being an early influence on her, and describes seeing Sarli's Spanish-language movies on 42nd Street with her mother.<sup>13</sup> She writes:

Sarli's films sometimes ended tragically, but I think I consciously didn't pay too much attention to the ends of the film, I was admiring the sin ... I was liking her power and daring, the life that that represented, her confidence in her sexuality, and to be able to use it, to be that type of woman, to be *all* woman. (28)

In Vanessa's retelling, rather than Latina sexuality being shrouded in Catholic propriety and sexual repression, she narrates growing up surrounded by culturally authorized performances of a Latina *hyper*-sexuality, gender performances that were foundational to her self-fashioning. Moreover, this passage makes clear her early innate understanding of gender *as* performance, and sexuality as a self-styled instrument of power. She goes on to say:

[W]atching *Fuego*, a movie I originally saw when I was 16, I thought how most people don't want to accept all aspects of woman, they just want to praise the Madonna, the mother, and not explore the slut. ... I like the word *slut*. It is a strong word for women who embrace their sexuality and refuse to be sexually controlled. (28)



Figure 2. Isabel Sarli.

For del Rio, embracing sexuality and refusing to be sexually controlled becomes a way to counter the standard formula of victimhood and recovery that is so prevalent in tell-all biographies of retired Anglo porn stars like Linda Lovelace, Jenna Jameson, Traci Lorde, and Jennie Ketcham.<sup>14</sup> Keenly aware of how others have been able to profit by fulfilling narrative desires for confession and redemption, del Rio seems to hold those who claim they “only did it for the money” in particular disdain.

As a genre, the biographies of porn stars tend to traffic in sad stories of teenage sexual abuse and addiction and when, and if, they survive to tell the tale themselves, generally end with the triumph of true love. For example, the *Publisher's Weekly* review of Jenna Jameson's *New York Times* best-seller *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star: A Cautionary Tale*, claims: “Beneath Jameson's monstrous diva exterior, however, was a girl who just wanted to become a loving mother and wife. After many failures, she finally succeeded, and her X-rated book ends on an uplifting family-values note” (Strauss 2014). Without a hint of irony, in Jameson's text, rather than chapter titles, each section is divided into books with Roman numerals, preceded by an epigraph from a Shakespearean sonnet. Here we see how whiteness, particularly when paired with motherhood, works to authenticate narratives of redemption and romance even as it facilitates the mainstreaming of pornography. In contrast, del Rio refuses to cast herself as a victim of the porn industry or of life, and reiterates her sense of control and sexual agency throughout the book. But she is invested in asserting more than her agency; what del Rio seems most intent in describing is her pleasure, the



sheer joy and satisfaction of her many sexual escapades. She clearly avows, “I like sex, I have always liked sex; and I will never deny liking sex” (28), and throughout the text, she narrates an almost insatiable appetite for sexual adventure.

A story that seems emblematic of this attitude takes place when responding to a question about her first performance in an adult film wherein she describes her nervousness, not about having sex on camera, but about saying her lines correctly. Part way through the on-camera interview, she interrupts herself, turns to us, her viewers, and blurts out: “And I blew the cameraman! During a break!” At this point in the interview, she begins to laugh uncontrollably, finally adding, “In those days everybody just had a good ol’ time” (DVD min. 31). Blowing the cameraman, in this story as in others, becomes a way for her to assert that sex was not just something she did for money: it was something she did for fun.<sup>15</sup>

### **Refusing victim**

The structure of the book, chapters that are not quite chronological, and not quite thematic, suggest that the editor – Dian Hanson – tried as best she could to group hours of filmed interview material into some sort of narrative shape. For example, a chapter entitled “Chicka Chicka Boom” is devoted to her discussion of how racial politics informed del Rio’s career in the adult-film industry, one aspect of the porn industry she is not shy about critiquing. Another chapter, “Gym Rat,” is devoted to a brief period where she left porn, took steroids, and began a career as a body builder. Even as this project with Dian Hansen and Taschen is another attempt to reinvigorate her brand – the book is dedicated “To My Fans, May I Always Be Your Mistress of Masturbatory Memories” – and turn a profit doing it, it is also an opportunity to demonstrate her control of her public image, to control how she will be remembered. Unlike most “as told to” print autobiographies, the addition of on-screen interviews allows the consumer of these narratives to see the subject speaking on camera. We get not just her story but the performance of her story; we are able to see her laugh and gesture and several times, turn away from Hansen to address us, the audience, directly. Not only does she insist on telling her story her way, she also insists on interpreting it within her own frame of understanding. And it is this element that I ultimately found most provocative about the text and most challenging as a critic.

Throughout the recorded interview and repeated throughout the text, she continually insists that she never really had any “bad” experiences sexually, stating: “I really enjoyed my life, I never did anything that I didn’t want to do where I wasn’t in on it, even if I felt it was something that I had to do, I would always find some way to be in on it. I would never let myself become the victim or feel victimized” (DVD min. 13). The book does not shy away from describing the many forms of violation and victimization that impact the lives of women, people of color, and sex workers, and del Rio acknowledges she is grateful she never got “sucked in” and “spit out,” but she also distinguishes that from feeling like a victim (DVD min. 23). Del Rio’s refusal of the term victim marks an important interpretive intervention into dominant narratives that cast the subjects of gendered violence as perpetual, de facto, ahistorical victims.

In juridical discourse, the term victim operates within the binary poles of guilt and innocence, victim and victimizer, setting the foundation for reparations and punishment. But the term also contains other meanings that surface in its deployment, a religious reference to sacrifice that is linked to salvation, and another that defines it as “one who is reduced or destined to suffer some oppressive or destructive agency” (O.E.D.). The Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor’s term “survivance” provides an apt meditation to help elucidate del Rio’s discomfort with the term victim. He writes: “Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry” (1994, iii). Like the indigenous populations of North America and elsewhere, sex workers are most often narratively depicted as the perpetual victims of patriarchal power, damaged beyond repair, even as liberal politics plot their salvation. In contrast, Vizenor’s term survivance brings together the resilience of survival *as* resistance, as it insists on acknowledging presence in the face of societal demands for disappearance.

Del Rio’s repeated insistence on not wanting to be cast as a victim functions to repudiate some feminist critiques of those that work in the porn industry while refusing salvation or erasure. But survival and resistance have also come to function as familiar and expected narrative tropes in feminist scholarship on sexuality, eliding the more complicated and vexed question of how pleasure might endure. Nicole Fleetwood makes this point most powerfully in her essay “The Case of Rihanna: Erotic Violence and Black Female Desire,” when she asserts that “black women are brought into dominant narrative folds as victims of unbearable suffering” (2012, 422) and she urges cultural critics to probe possibilities for black sexual practices that are not framed through dominant frameworks of suffering, resistance, or exploitation” (2012, 422). Jennifer Nash in her work on race and pornography similarly argues against what she terms the “twin logics of injury and recovery which make theorizing black female pleasure from within the parameters of the [pornographic] archive a kind of impossibility” (2014, 25–26). These African American feminist scholars echo del Rio in their refusal to elide questions of black female pleasure, and it is this resolute determination to assert possibilities for pleasure that functions as del Rio’s ongoing retort to her imagined feminist critics. She declares: “Some feminists have said, ‘Wasn’t that exploitation?’ And I’d say, ‘No, that was my pleasure’” (84). But del Rio’s insistence on not being perceived as a victim can also be read as her demand that she be recognized as an authorial agent, capable of not only narrating her life but determining its significance.

Many of the stories in the book are those you might expect from a porn star, her on-screen accomplishments (she claims the distinction of having filmed the first double penetration in porn); her frustration at being continually typecast as the ethnic Other to the blondes who received top billing and top salaries; and her early days in an industry that was just starting to explode with cross-over films like *Deep Throat* (1972) and *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973). But del Rio’s book also recounts stories that are considerably more disturbing, if also equally commonplace, stories that too often constitute the sad stuff of the everyday for many women of color. In del Rio’s narrative the lecherous uncle, the manipulative boyfriend, the abusive police officer – all make routine appearances. The familiarity of these tales is itself unsettling. However, rather than recount these stories through the language of victimhood and trauma, del Rio narrates them with

almost comic nonchalance, as another obstacle to overcome, another futile attempt to make her feel less than whole, as another testament of survivance.

This repeated insistence on narrating everyday forms of trauma without recourse to “fixing” in the Fanonian sense, subjects as traumatized victims, reorients feminist sexual politics away from gendered norms of protected white womanhood, positioning those of us that have been violated, colonized, abused, harmed, and exploited at the very heart of feminist politics, as the norm of what constitutes a gendered experience.<sup>16</sup> For Latinas, these everyday violations include the nefarious modes through which our sexuality is used to define and discipline the possibilities of our social worlds; the ways our bodies and tongues – tinged by colonial anxieties that mark us as both colonizer and colonized – render our sexual countenance as wholly excessive, yet always lacking; and the ways our sex has been used to shame us. Frances Negrón Muntaner situates the trope of shame as foundational to the ethnic, racial, and gendered identities of Puerto Ricans, declaring:

[B]oricua bodies are persistently negotiating their shameful constitution, refashioning the looks that aim to humiliate or take joy away from them. At the same time, it is impossible to deny that our most vital cultural production as boricuas has sprung not from the denial of shame, but from its acknowledgement into wounds that we can be touched by. (xviii)

Frequently in her narrative, del Rio asks readers to dwell in the complicated, shameful erotic registers that violence can sometimes instantiate, even as she actively describes how the lines between fantasy, reality, the narrative scripts of porn, and her own intimate sexual play melt into one another. Early on in the book, she recalls being around 12 and hearing her mother warn her of the dangers of the streets by reading her newspaper articles about young girls getting raped. Rather than instilling terror or inspiring caution, although perhaps this was also their impact, the young girl that grew up to be Vanessa del Rio used those stories as the narrative building blocks for her sexual fantasies. She states:

There was a popular Spanish wrestler. ... El Santo, [he] was the masked good guy, but he became tangled up in my fantasies. I developed scenarios about being overpowered by masked rapists based on his image, which I later played out with my lover, Reb. (32)

Already in this moment of recounting her childhood, we witness how the link between sex and violence gets mined for its erotic potential, as she manages to hold in tension the threat of violence and possibility of pleasure.

Returning to Nicole Fleetwood’s pointed insights proves invaluable here. Fleetwood challenges what she terms “a coercive agenda” of “black recuperative heterosexuality” (2012, 422) to offer alternative forms of understanding erotic attachments to violence “that do not conform to dominant frameworks of exploitation, of racial uplift and respectability” and that are not predicated on narratives of victimization or pathology. She writes:

How do cultural critics account for highly eroticized attachments in black heterosexual intimacies that are hinged on the force of masculinized violence? In moving the analysis of sexual subjugation beyond the framework of fantasy, we need to fashion analytic tools to examine black women’s sexual practices where pleasure and attachment are interwoven with the threat or reality of physical harm. (421)

As Fleetwood suggests, moving the analysis beyond the framework of fantasy complicates our ability to come to terms with all the ways that as women of color, violence gets multiply coded into our sexual lives, and the ways domination and abjection haunt the sexual imaginary of racialized subjects. In Vanessa del Rio's retelling of her life, we see not just the eroticization of violence and even terror, but we also witness the possibility that some forms of corporeal and psychic violence might come to function as self-defined forms of sexual pleasure.

Let me present another biographical scene that pushes the boundaries of intelligibility even further, well beyond fantasy. In another episode, del Rio describes having to have sex with a state trooper in order to get her boyfriend out of jail – she begins telling the story by explaining:

It was like the movies, where you have to put out to get your boyfriend out of jail. And to the extent that it was like the movies, there was something exciting about it – plus he was handsome, blond, and ruggedly studly. (107)<sup>17</sup>

Once again del Rio returns to the images of sexuality that have been projected on the silver screen as a narrative filter through which to make sense of what is happening in her real life. And while the trope of “a good girl forced to do something immoral to save the man she loves” might be a familiar one in Hollywood, the story takes a decidedly twisted turn when she reveals that over the course of the exchange with the officer she had an orgasm. She goes on to exclaim:

It was so theatrical, such a humiliating adventure, that I have an orgasm but I don't let him know because I don't want to give him the satisfaction. I don't think he would have believed it if he'd known, since this was supposed to be his power game . . . . Ooh, I felt like such a dirty girl for enjoying it! (107)<sup>18</sup>

In the filmed interview, she ends her account laughing, as if she is keenly aware of the ironic perversity of the juxtaposition of state coercion and her own sexual gratification. At this point the DVD cuts to a clip of one of her porn performances in which she is playing an inmate being forced to sexually accommodate her prison guard, and we witness another, much campier, representation of state sexual violence.

On one level this story seems ripped from the headlines about the Oklahoma police officer Daniel Holtzclaw who was convicted of raping and sexually assaulting more than a dozen Black women, some of whom were street-level prostitutes, because he felt they were unlikely to report his rape and abuse (Philipps 2015). And both stories affirm studies that document the relationship between the criminalization of sex work, police enforcement practices, and violence against those suspected of being prostitutes. One study goes as far as suggesting that “prior assault by police had the strongest correlation with both sexual and client perpetrated violence against female sex workers” (Shannon et al. 2009, 5). In fact, in her written account of this incident, del Rio mentions that she “thought he must have done this before because he just nodded at the motel clerk and drove straight to the room” (107). Sadly, sexual harassment and assault of women imagined to be prostitutes by police is a common-day occurrence, a direct result of laws that criminalize sex work. Dark, Latina, and daring to occupy the public sphere as a sexual being,

Vanessa del Rio fit the racially gendered profile for prostitute, even when she was not engaged in sex work.

Even if the events are strikingly similar and equally horrific, watching del Rio tell the story onscreen *feels* different to me as spectator because of *how* it is told. Sitting in her living room, surrounded in leopard prints (“leopard” is her favorite color), drinking wine and telling story after story, her image on-screen assures the viewer that she is just fine, that she not only endured the violence of her youth but managed to thrive (Figure 3).<sup>19</sup>

In recounting the story through the lens of mainstream cinema, del Rio uses the narrative familiarity as a way to normalize the violence, “where you have to put out to get your boyfriend out of jail.” But as the scene continues, she uses this event to offer her rendering of how she was able to assimilate this violation within the interpretative framework of her own world-view. “This is the kind of thing I mean, where I take away but they don’t take anything from me, I take from it” (DVD min. 1:14). Del Rio regards this experience, not as evidence of trauma, but as an act of revenge that is made available to her through her ability to access pleasure, a pleasure that includes both her orgasm and her delight in hiding that fact from her assailant. In making sense of her experience, as one that is defined by coercion but which also includes her ability to experience orgasm, she attempts to rewrite the terms under which sexual violence, resistance, and retribution are understood.

As a critic, I return again and again to the axiom from Joan Scott’s essay “The Evidence of Experience”: “Experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted” (1993, 412). In that piece, Scott asks us to do more than just include other voices in our feminist formulations of experience; she compels us to think about the available frameworks of intelligibility that experience enters as it comes into language. Read through Scott, we can understand that del Rio’s account of her experience already implies a level of interpretation; it has already been framed by the interpretive possibilities available to her, including those offered by both mainstream cinema and mainstream feminism. Following Fleetwood and Nash, we also see how race functions to censor the sexual narratives of certain subjects, making some accounts unspeakable. Yet for both the young Afro-Latina who was stopped and assaulted by the police for no apparent reason, and present-day del Rio, the seasoned sex worker and porn star who has lived in intimate proximity to sexual violence and is now looking back on that moment, the interpretive possibilities include her ability to access her own sexual pleasure and script it as an act of sexual subversion, even in the midst of a coercive encounter. Furthermore, del Rio’s account of herself exposes the ways the experiences of racialized subject positions that are not white, middle-class, or “respectable” are made illegible within feminist frameworks that fail to account for the possibility of pleasure in the sexual lives of those who are constituted by violence.

As a critic, I might be able to argue with her analysis of these events, but in order to do justice to del Rio’s version of this story, I also have to find a way to make sense of the trace of the real, of her laughter, of the materiality of her orgasm, and of her desire to control the terms under which intelligibility functions. In her essay, “Ruminations on *Lo Sucio* as a Latino Queer Analytic,” Deborah Vargas (2014) proposes *lo sucio*, as a way to account for the dirty sensory pleasures of non-normative sexualities of those “deemed collateral genders within a social world invested in the fiscal benefits of normative sexual intimacies.” For Vargas, *lo sucio* offers “a way to theorize the performative tactics that genderqueer feminine



Figure 3. Still from untitled Taschen DVD.

sexualities enact to remain the magnificent refuse of surplus while in refusal of vanishing.” Even in the face of police violence that aims to subjugate and dehumanize her, Vanessa del Rio rebuffs efforts to reduce her experience to the narrative tropes of normative heterofemininity or redemptive victimhood. She refuses to vanish, and instead shamelessly relishes the dirty, sensory, and performative excesses associated with *la puta*, the slut, the whore.

Because Latinas come to sexuality through the multifarious forms of violence brought about through colonization, enslavement, migration, and the wounds of public and private patriarchy, scenes of violence, violation, and shame are core to our understandings of sexual subjectivity, kindling an explosion of diverse and divergent affective responses. Each response fashions its own meaning from the paradox of logic and chaos that defines cruelty, each functions as its own form of acknowledgement that some glimmer of self-love might outlive the harms. However, even as these rejoinders to the extravagant and quotidian harms that surround us can never fully redress the injuries we have endured, they serve to rupture any semblance of an appropriate, rational response to the logic of sexual and racial subjection that is intent on defining our position in the world.

### The Reb Stout affair

In a book that repeatedly asserts del Rio’s sense of control and sexual agency, the inclusion of one particular chapter stands out for the ways it complicates narratives of how sexual empowerment might be understood. Entitled the “Reb Stout Affair,” it is devoted to a

seven-month affair with Reb Stout, a Los Angeles native and S/M aficionado. Stout claimed to have seven distinct personalities with male, female, and genderqueer manifestations, each with a distinct name, wardrobe, and sexual proclivities, some quite dominant and indeed sadistic, some wholly submissive. Curiously, no mention of this period and no reference to these images occur in the DVD. And while the rest of the book is full of glossy movie posters and professional stills from her films and colorful magazine spreads, the photographs in this chapter are taken from the extensive amateur photographic archive Stout and del Rio produced during their time as lovers, images that often include costumes, wigs, ropes, whips, and assorted sexual paraphernalia. In the introduction to this chapter Hanson states, “every sexual encounter was captured on film, including all the ecstasy, terror and tears. It was love 1970s style and not for the faint of heart” (163).



Figure 4. Source: *Image courtesy of Reb Stout*

Vanessa del Rio describes her initial coming together with Stout stating: “It was, ‘Oh, you like to wear makeup and women’s clothing and stick dildos up your ass? And jerk off and take pictures? Ok!’”(167). Some of these images are quite playful and queer and depict the spirit of endless sexual experimentation that their brief affair was founded upon. In [Figure 4](#) we see Stout in a platinum-blond wig, spike heels, and pearls bound and bent over while del Rio stares in the camera coquettishly with her mouth agape as she yanks his penis back between his legs.

Other images reveal a more conscious self-posing against the makeshift background of a rather ordinary domestic space, a space that includes a fish tank, assorted six-inch high heels, potted plants, erotic art, a fishing net with starfish, scattered sex toys, and lots and lots of mirrors. “Whenever we got together we had a scene, every day. Sometimes other people would be there ... and we’d always take photos” (167). Twenty-one photographs are included in this chapter, nine black-and-white images, and 12 color images, but we can imagine that many more were produced during their brief period together. In several of the photographs, Vanessa is seen wearing her lover’s exaggerated blond wig, the only images of her as a blond that we see in a book that is replete with images of physical transformation.<sup>20</sup> If in her professional career her dark tresses were central to her Latina vixen persona, here she is free to play with racial self-fashioning. While she is frequently photographed staring into the camera, Stout’s face never appears in the images included in this chapter, his face either covered with flowing long hair, or concealed behind the black mask of his “Ripper” persona, which del Rio describes as “an extreme male fantasy of rape and force” (167).

While del Rio has appeared in several S/M themed films, or “roughies,” as they were called, and describes enjoying the emotional potency, stamina, and physicality that they require, the images in this chapter have another feel altogether, their amateur quality exudes a different kind of intensity and intimacy. It is not that the other scenes of her having sex are not real – or do not depict real pleasure, they do, but because they were also work, because she was also acting and aware of performing for an audience, she seems to maintain a certain composure, even perhaps glamour in the midst of scenes of sexual submission that suggest her control of the scene. In contrast, in several of the photographs in this chapter, we are allowed to glimpse something else – a sexual vulnerability that exposes her willingness to experience something beyond the carnal pleasures of sex, outside of the structures of rationality. By fully inhabiting her body, del Rio manages to hold in tension violence and pleasure, submission and agency. Thinking back to that time, she reflects:

As I got deeper into the relationship with Reb I pushed all the limits of his personalities and found I liked being really frightened. I wanted to push them until I believed their threats, not just submit because someone said to submit ... “make me,” I always said. Reb told me I was a SAM, a Smart-Ass-Masochist, always egging on the dominant. (171)

Del Rio is not just asking to be dominating, she is demanding it, goading her top into seizing greater control. Here, the romanticized kernel of a childhood sexual fantasy about El Santo is transformed into an affective encounter with terror in adult sexual play, an opportunity to use sex to explore the psychic residue that her experiences have imparted, and make of them something else. She continues:



Every scene was about trying to break me, but I didn't know how to be broken. Breaking would have meant tears, I think, tears of total submission. There was sobbing, from pain and discomfort and sexual pleasure, but the pleasure always won out, which I guess meant that I stayed strong. (171–2)

Curiously, none of this dialogue is captured in the DVD, and appears only in the book, even as the tone suggests the kind of conversation that might occur between friends.

It bears emphasizing that this was consensual sex, it was desired abjection, and in del Rio's mind, this scene, and these images capture an emotional intensity her many years in front of a camera were never able to see – a corporeal desire to be free from the rational demands of self-control and composure. For a porn star like Vanessa del Rio, whose sexualized body has been captured, reproduced, and circulated a million different ways, the photographic memorialization of an intimate affair offers something beyond autobiographical documentation, it captures an affective moment in time, a psychic space that functions to disrupt subjectivity. Del Rio describes this desire for a release of subjectivity, and an inability to allow herself to exceed the limits of reason when she states: "I didn't know how to be broken."

Let me conclude by offering an image from the series of photographs that depict one of her sexual encounters with "Ripper," the very photographs that she describes in a promotional video for Taschen, as being her favorite images in the entire book (*Vanessa*). Of this series of images she writes:

I think the only time I truly submitted is in these pictures where Reb's in his Ripper personality and his balls are in my mouth and you see the sweat and mascara running because I was choking on them. It wasn't horrible in any way, but it was total submission, and that was a strange feeling for me. It felt freeing; I didn't feel any responsibility in any way. It was also very rough. (172)

We can imagine that "very rough" might refer to being bound and nearly gagged by her lover's testicles, but I have seen enough of her on-screen performances to know that the physical demands of this scene were not unfamiliar to Vanessa del Rio the actress. Instead, perhaps what was "very rough" was the freedom, the freedom to submit completely, to give herself over to another and to herself and dwell in the space beyond rationality and reason.

The image is striking (Figure 5). Stout's shaved pubis appears almost feminine, queerly juxtaposed against the hairiness of his arms. Here, del Rio's always flawless makeup is smeared from sweat and tears; her eyes, thick with smudged mascara, are closed; her mouth ajar; her teeth showing slightly as the head of his penis rests between her lips. This is not about glamour. Even as we read this as an image of physical and emotional intensity, there is also tenderness in the position of his fingers on her face. The photograph exudes a calmness that defines her submission. While Stout's face never appears in this chapter, his words do. And in reference to these images he states: "She had tears in her eyes while she was cumming – a series of concentrated orgasms like I'd never seen before ... and it was marvelous to see!" (176). Even as it is *her* pain, *her* submission that is evident in these photographs, the absence of his face in these images, like his testicles in her mouth, serves to evidence *his* vulnerability – to exposure, to memory, to encountering the affective power of his own carnal and psychic desires.



Figure 5. Source: *Image courtesy of Reb Stout*

### ***Entrega total***

In her eloquent treatise, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*, Amber Musser (2014) declares: “Reading [masochism] as exceptional reifies norms of whiteness and masculinity and suppresses other modes of reading power, agency, and experience” (6). Masochism implies the renunciation of power and control, therefore for racialized feminine subjects it functions as a way to both claim an intrinsic power that can then be surrendered, and to actively inhabit the social and sexual roles to which we have been assigned on our own terms.<sup>21</sup> In the book, the caption for this photograph reads as follows: “I will refer you to the Spanish saying, ‘Sin palabras’, without words” (176). In this moment, without words, del Rio resorts to the Spanish to mark something beyond the logocentrism demanded of rational subjects.

Vanessa del Rio’s auto/biographical narrative, and the images used to document them, represent complicated psychic realities that require us to question how we engage with those stories that are too painful, too raw to process fully in language. Confronted with her *testimonio*, del Rio’s account of herself, we attempt to make meaning from the traces of the real that her text provides. But *testimonio* can also slide into the spectacle of the ethnographic, seeming to provide entry into the psychic realities of the Other whose experiences

might seem so divorced from our own frames of intelligibility. Therefore, it is del Rio's insistence on authorizing her own interpretive frame, rather than the experiences themselves, that pose the greatest challenge to existing feminist formulations of sexual politics.

Vanessa del Rio's narrative performance of sexual adventure, power, violence, and pleasure demands an audience, but we cannot embrace the sexual agency of this icon of Latina sexuality without grappling with the more difficult registers of racialized sexuality that her text also reveals; similarly we cannot simply dismiss her account of her life because it does not conform to the feminist interpretations we might wish to impose. So how can we talk about pleasure, narrate its peculiarities in ways that account for the complicated emotions that are so often wrapped around its articulation? And speaking directly to the contours of this project, how can we represent someone else's pleasure or indeed their experience of violence or trauma without privileging our own interpretive frameworks?

Violence permeates this text, yet del Rio's reaction to it, whether it is news reports of neighborhood rapes, her own violation at the hands of a state trooper, or her desire for sexual submission with her lover Reb – at times seems to call her account of herself into question, making her sexuality seemingly unintelligible. Yet, that unintelligibility is precisely what offers a critical perspective on the very structures of meaning that would suggest that an adequate, rational, and recognizable response to sexual violence is possible. Furthermore, it exposes how feminist frameworks that have been sculpted through the life experiences of those for whom the privileges of race, class, or social position have provided shelter, have failed to account for the profound power of the sexual experiences of so many racialized feminine subjects. For women of color, for whom extravagant and quotidian cruelties are the norm, there can never be one "right" affective response to violence, one interpretive trope for engaging the harms that surround us. That an aging Afro-Latina porn star might offer us alternative understandings of the workings of female sexual survival and pleasure, makes it all the more urgent that we wrestle with the ability of speaking subjects to narrate their own complex realities, even and especially when their interpretations unsettle the preexisting logics we might wish to impose. But while we need to listen to these alternate forms of meaning making, we also need to leave room for those moments that resist meaning, those moments that allow us to refuse the imperative to "be strong" if only for a minute. In a world where so many of us are defined as always already irrational and outside structures of sexual and social legibility, those deeply painful and powerful moments of carnal pleasure, liberated from the constraints of language, image, and reason, might burst open to create possibilities for something akin to freedom.

## Notes

1. I wish to thank the co-editors of this volume for their generous engagement with my work. I am further indebted to my anonymous peer reviewers who shared their knowledge and expertise on the pornographic archive, and my colleagues Shari Huhndorf and Leigh Raiford, each of whom provided key insights at critical points in the writing process. This paper was presented at numerous academic venues before publication; each audience contributed to my own thinking and theorization of this work, and deserves my heartfelt thanks for allowing me to work through these ideas aloud. Finally, I am indebted to Ana María Sanchez (AKA Vanessa del Rio), for her permission to reproduce these images, for following me on Twitter, and for her many films. As a young Latina who came of age watching pornography, her films offered me a vital vision of Latina sexuality, an image that continues to inspire me many years later.

2. All references to the book refer to the trade version. Two other versions of the book are available on Taschen's website, the weight and page count for those versions are slightly different. The book is published by Taschen, based in Cologne, Germany and printed in Italy. The book includes translations of the text into German and French at the end, an indication of how Vanessa del Rio has traveled transnationally.
3. The bibliography for porn studies has been growing exponentially since Williams's (1999) groundbreaking text *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* originally published in 1989. For intersections of race and pornography see Nash (2014) and Miller-Young (2014), discussed in greater detail below; see also Shimizu (2007) and Nguyen (2014). Useful edited volumes include *Porn Archives* (Dean et al. 2014); *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* (Taormino et al. 2013); *Porn Studies* (Williams 2004); *New Views on Pornography: Sexuality, Politics, and the Law* (Comella and Tarrant 2015); and *Coming Out Like a Porn Star: Essays on Pornography, Protection, and Privacy* (Lee 2015). A new academic journal *Porn Studies* devoted to this burgeoning field of academic inquiry was launched in 2014.
4. As one reviewer smartly indicated, the issue of having del Rio play a maid is considerably more complicated than this sentence might suggest. For example, in the 1984 film *Maid in Manhattan*, sometimes referenced as *Vanessa: Maid in Manhattan*, del Rio received star billing and the film, including its title, is centered on her character. However, in her book, del Rio frequently describes what it was like being one of very few women of color, stating: "No matter how glamorous I looked I'd still be the maid or some smart ass hoochie mama" (194). In 2002, Jennifer Lopez, another famous Puerto Rican, also starred in a film of the same name.
5. Examples include *Play Me Again Vanessa* and *Viva Vanessa*, both of which appeared in 1984.
6. There are numerous compilation videos; those released before her retirement include *Vanessa's Bed of Pleasures* and *Vanessa's Hot Nights*, released in 1980; and *The Erotic World of Vanessa #1*, *The Erotic World of Vanessa #2*, and *Vanessa del Rio's Fantasies*, all released in 1981. Those released after her retirement include, *Hot Shorts: Vanessa del Rio*, *Vanessa Obsession* (1987), *Best of Vanessa del Rio* (1988), and *Taste of Vanessa del Rio* (1990). A decade later, in 2001, three new compilations were released: *Vanessa del Rio—Dirty Deeds*, *Vanessa del Rio—Some Like it Hot*, *Vanessa del Rio Stars in Celebrity Sinners*, and *Vanessa X-Posed*. And 2004 saw the release of *Vanessa's Anal Fiesta*, *Vanessa and Friends*, as well as her inclusion in the compilations *Mucho Mucho Latinas*, *Ah Carumba*, and *Strokin' to the Oldies*. Examples of films that were reissued to profit from her popularity include the 1976 film *Come to Me* retitled as *Hot Wired Vanessa* and the 1977 film *Reunion* retitled as both *Vanessa Gets It!* and as *Vanessa's Wild Reunion*.
7. While del Rio's iconicity exceeds the scope of this paper, it bears mentioning and speaks to the multiple audiences for whom she is legendary. Included among those that contributed blurbs for this book are the rappers Snoop Dogg and Foxy Brown; the feminist pornographer and creator of Femme Productions, Candida Royale; and the cartoonist Robert Crumb. She is also referenced through different forms of popular culture. Del Rio makes cameo appearances in a 1996 episode of NYPD Blue entitled "Head Case" and the music video "Get Money," by Junior M.A.F.I.A. featuring The Notorious B.I.G. (Rivera 1996); and her name is referenced in the Digital Underground (1990) song "Freaks of the Industry," and Chubb Rock's (1990) "Just the Two of Us" to name just a few. On Twitter del Rio has over 53,000 followers. She hosts a X-rated porn site, [vanessadelrio.com](http://vanessadelrio.com) where she performs weekly live web-cam shows for members and she has a designated page on ebay to sell memorabilia, <http://stores.ebay.com/vanessadelriomemorabilia/>. With her cooperation, the director Thomas Mignone is currently filming a bio-pic film project based on her life in Times Square during the 1970s and early 1980s. It is being described as *Boogie Nights* meets *Taxi Driver* (Obenson 2015). For more on the black body as icon see Nicole Fleetwood's *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* (2015).
8. While these books both tackle the subject of black women and pornography, they are also quite different in their approaches and are both highly recommended. Miller-Young's more

historically inflected text includes numerous interviews with key figures and extensive archival material, including references from early stag films, the golden age of porn, the home-video era, and the current digital circulation of pornography. Focused more on close textual analysis of specific films and the (im)possibility of “the black body in ecstasy” in pornographic films produced in the 1970s and 1980s, Jennifer Nash’s book offers theoretically generative and artfully crafted close readings of a smaller archive of films. Both authors provide significantly more contextual information on the era I reference here as the “golden age of porn” than this article allows. That period, roughly from 1970–85, marked a period in which some adult feature films were screened in movie theaters and reviewed in mainstream press including the *New York Times* and *Variety*. That heightened publicity allowed a star-system to develop and also generated more elaborate marketing campaigns oriented around specific actors. The rise of the home video marked the end of this period.

9. For more on the politics and performance of testimonial literature in Latin America, see Beverley (1993) and the anthology *The Real Thing*, edited by George M. Gugelberger (1996).
10. In 2015, Amnesty International began to advocate for the decriminalization of sex work as part of an effort to address human-rights violations against sex workers (Carvajal 2015). Human Rights Watch (2014) issued a similar statement in their *World Report 2014*. Linking the decriminalization of sex work to a parallel effort to decriminalize simple drug use and possession, their report states: “Criminalization in both cases can cause or exacerbate a host of ancillary human rights violations, including exposure to violence from private actors, police abuse, discriminatory law enforcement, and vulnerability to blackmail, control, and abuse by criminals. These severe and common consequences, and the strong personal interest that people have in making decisions about their own bodies, mean it is unreasonable and disproportionate for the state to use criminal punishment to discourage either practice” (47). See also the Human Rights Watch (2015) report, *Condoms as Evidence*, for their study on how condom possession is being used to prosecute sex workers and target those imagined to be sex workers, pointing to the ways these policing practices disproportionately impact transwomen and women of color.
11. There are entire sections that are recorded on camera, such as her describing the Santeria practices of her Cuban father, that are not referenced in the book. There are also sections in the book that have no corresponding mention in the DVD, most notably the Reb Stout chapter discussed later. To complicate matters further, there are passages in the book that *do* correspond to on-camera interviews but which appear to have been edited somewhat in post-production for clarity. In this essay, I cite the specific source, either the book or the DVD, and mention notable discrepancies.
12. This is not to suggest that her audience consists of solely white men who have no connection to stories of racial and gendered violence, her fan base is quite diverse. Yet, being reminded of these more realistic aspects of del Rio’s story may complicate a more sexually inflected viewing of the film.
13. For more on Sarli see Ruétela (2004) and Foster (2008).
14. More recently the genre of porn-star memoir has exploded, including more texts by women of color; see recent titles by Asia Akira (2015), India Morel (2013), and Roxy Reynolds (2014).
15. Nash’s (2014) chapter, “Laughing Matters,” in *The Black Body in Ecstasy* might be particularly useful in reading how humor functions in del Rio’s films, and in her own narrative as a way to make visible the absurdity of racist and gendered fictions surrounding sexual pleasure.
16. In his essay “The Fact of Blackness,” in *Black Skins White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (1967) writes of the colonial gaze, “the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye” (109).
17. This is an instance where the recorded audio and the “transcribed” interview are not quite identical. In the recorded interview there is no mention of him being “handsome, blond, and ruggedly studly.” In both the written version and the on-screen interview, the story itself is quite long and detailed. The written account is over three paragraphs long and appears in a section about run-ins with the police. I have elected to cite the textual version for clarity.
18. Once again the language in the film clip is slightly different than what is printed in the book. In the DVD there is no mention of it being “so theatrical, such a humiliating adventure” and also no

mention of “Ooh, I felt like such a dirty girl for enjoying it!” These additions appear to have been added later.

19. In a list included in the book entitled “The Basic Vanessa,” in addition to listing leopard as a favorite color, she lists her favorite book/author as *Macho Sluts* by Pat Califia, and her hero as Muhammad Ali (258).
20. The physical changes to her face, hair, skin color, genitals, and body, brought about through self-styling, photographic manipulation, age, and technologies of the body are quite evident throughout the book. In the chapter “Gym Rat,” she describes a brief period where she began to take steroids, developing both her muscles and the size of her clitoris, which is reported to be over five centimeters long (224). Later in her life, she also underwent breast augmentation, and the newer images include tattoos.
21. In addition to Musser’s superb text, for additional readings at the nexus of race and sexualized forms of power relations, see also Hoang Tan Nguyen’s (2014) *A View of the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*; Darieck Scott’s (2010) *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*, and my own *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (Rodríguez, 2014).

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