Hijas de la Putisima: A Trans Femme Perspective on Juana María Rodríguez' *Puta Life*

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*Abstract: To be a "*puta*" means to be a whore, a prostitute, a slut, or more formally, a sex worker. More commonly, it is used as a derogatory term against women who do not conform to "proper" sexual and gender norms. In* Puta Life*, Juana María Rodríguez explores the histories of Latina sex workers through archives, documentaries, pornography and social media. In this paper I outline the methodological tools Rodríguez uses to read "*puta *lives." As such, I argue that her model of queer affective kinship, and loving personal readings of* puta *life provide ample resources for work in trans studies as well.*

"The racialized classed markers that cling most fervently to Black and Latina bodies — skin-tight clothes, animal prints, red everything, bold lipstick and nails, high heels, visible cleavage, short skirts, and the performative attitude to pull it off."

– Juana María Rodríguez (1982)[1]

Puta Life: Seeing Latinas, Working Sex came to my life at a very opportune time. With five years of hormone replacement therapy done, and two breast augmentation consultations set for the future, I was lucky enough to meet Juana María Rodríguez. Her hot pink boots, fuchsia dress, statement necklace, and fur coat could not have been more perfect for the author of *Puta Life*. I, of course, made sure to wear my biggest hoop earrings, skinny jeans cinched as tightly as possible at the waist, and a semi-see-through mesh shirt with a romantic scene of virginal white women being serenaded by lute-wielding men.

As a Latina trans femme, I do not usually have the opportunity to find role models in mainstream media. Rather, my main transition goals growing up (and I have to admit, even now), came from the world of trans porn.[2] A monochromatic Vanessa del Rio wearing burlesque, fringed lingerie, dark eye-makeup, enormous breasts, and a heart-breaking glare on *Puta Life's* cover, though, gave me that same affective feeling of "goals." We see how it

[1] Juana Maria Rodríguez, *Puta Life: Seeing Latinas, Working Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 119.

[2] For a trans person, someone being your "transition goals" (or more simply, just "goals") is when a person (usually a celebrity) represents what you would like to look like once you transition. Folks like Vanessa del Rio, la Veneno, and Mia Isabella are my goals.

works similarly through Rodríguez herself, as she notes that del Rio is one of her "most cherished puta icons" as well as "an early role model for [her] teenage version of a sexual life."[3] Vanessa del Rio also places herself in the genealogy of Latina *puta*-becoming by having the Argentinian soft-core porn star Isabel Sarli[4] be the role model of her own self-fashioning.[5] What this all alludes to is how *Puta Life* creates kinship through Latina desire, and excess.

The book is, in itself, excessive. And having a porn star on the cover is just the beginning. Each chapter gives the reader a framework of understanding of how Latina gender aesthetics become read through the *puta*, and how the readers themselves are implicated within this process. To be called a *puta* generally means to be a "hooker, slut, or bitch, and sometimes it is used to simply mean woman."[6] In *Puta Life* we see how the idea of the *puta* works along all these lines. While Rodríguez thankfully focuses on Latina sex workers (in various styles of sex work, such as street walkers, escorts, porn stars), she reads the *puta* aesthetics in a queer affective way. That is to say that in Rodríguez' reading of the *puta* she finds herself, and through such reading, the reader may find themself too. As highlighted above, *puta* could also simply mean (as derogatory) woman. The *puta* is a woman who is too excessive, whose skirts are too short, who wears too much make-up, who speaks out of turn, who knows what she wants.[7]

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[3] Rodríguez, 107 and 121.

[4] Of all the porn stars, Rodríguez honours Sarli as "*la putisima*" (the sluttiest).

[5] Rodríguez, 123

[6] Ibid., 16.

[7] I appreciate the insight from the journal editor here, where this definition of *puta* as excessive quite easily spills into how transness is conceived. From the "trans" prefix of going beyond or over, we see how transness is defined through

Again, as a trans femme reader, it becomes easy to fall into the category of excess, and as such, *puta*. Not only aesthetically, where the rule for breast augmentations is "the bigger the better," but economically as well.[8] As Kai Cheng Thom highlights, "If you're a trans girl with trans feminine friends, you're probably, at most, two degrees of separation away from sex work."[9] With all my friends, it is less than two degrees. Perhaps then, in a bit of a skewed sense, we can rehash what Viviane Namaste states as a conclusion to her book *Invisible Lives*: "[trans] people are perhaps better aligned with prostitute activists than with lesbians and gay men."[10] The natural assumption, of course, is that LGBT+ people stick together, but as similarly demonstrated in this book, or at the very least in my reading of it, I find myself more aligned with Latina prostitutes.[11]

In a literal connection to the importance of this book for trans studies, almost every chapter of *Puta Life* includes some reference to transness, or genderqueerness in the least. In the Introduction we see reference to Sylvia Rivera and the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). In Chapter 1 we meet Félix Rojas, a more "masculine" looking *mujer pública* who

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the state of being beyond the normative. For example, trans femmes are often banned from women's sports for being perceived as too good, or banned from beauty pageants for being too beautiful; excess follows trans femme embodiments.

[8] Not all trans femme's get surgery, or even do hormone replacement therapy. There is no consensus on sizing for trans femmes in those that do get a breast augmentation, though in Latina trans and travesti circles, it would not be heretical to say "go big or go home."

[9] Kai Cheng Thom, *I Hope we Choose Love* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2019), 138.

[10] Viviane Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 268.

[11] Cis and trans.

Rodríguez refers to with "they/them" pronouns.[12] Chapters 2 and 3 give us tastes of gender nonconforming male presentations. Chapter 4 shows us Ángeles, a trans woman documented in *Plaza de la Soledad* who is a sex worker in La Merced. Lastly, Chapter 5 is all about Adela Vásquez, a trans Cuban sex work activist. In a strictly historical sense, there is excellent content in these chapters on the pastness and contemporaneity of transness in Latin America as it relates to sex work.

I do not aim to deride this aspect, as it is certainly important; however, I found that these inclusions did not have as fruitful of a trans reading than other sections of *Puta Life*, and these were the sections where some suspicion seeped through. For example, in Chapter 1, all we have is a portrait of Félix Rojas, a "masculine" woman who was included in the registry of *mujeres públicas* in 19th century Mexico. As Rodríguez notes "nothing in the short bio offers anything suggesting Félix is different from the other women in the book."[13] As such, I question her decision to change the assumed pronouns of she/her to they/them. It seems like a reading of masculine features (in dress, hairstyle, name) pushes that decision, but the lack of further information on Rojas' life makes the short inclusion somewhat suspect. Similarly, in Chapter 4, we are first shown a picture of Ángeles in the middle of a dance, and later we are told that she is a trans woman.[14] The challenge of this inclusion comes from an absence once again. As Rodríguez mentions, Goded (the director of *Plaza de la Soledad*) does not reference Ángeles' transness in the documentary; rather, as

[12] Public woman. Used to refer to the sex workers in Mexico being registered through the state for health and sanitation.

[13] Rodríguez, 59.

[14] Ibid. 175-76.

Rodríguez reads through Trinh T. Minh-ha, Goded aims to make meaning "not rely on any single source of authority, but, rather, empt[y] or [decentralize] it."[15] As such, there is some irony in providing that source of authority in reference to Ángeles' history, of which the book, unwittingly, outs.

These rhetorical choices change the way the book is read. As with Félix, we may read transness on a face or body, but the absence of designation makes that reading not easily stabilized (as Trinh Minh-ha writes).[16] Many of the other photos included in the book could have been of trans women or trans femmes as well. Even the cover of Vanessa del Rio gave me a feeling of transness, but I am of two minds here. While I hold my suspicions of the inclusion of some trans narrative because of the inevitable gaps in the history presented, I also appreciate the inclusion. Again, these inclusions are important. The visibility of transness historically is important and acknowledging the history of sex work in trans lives is integral to modern trans activist movements as well. Rodríguez is doing important work in this aspect. Further, the designation of transness does not entirely delimit who is trans in the photographs reproduced; rather, these clear inclusions (for which the Chapter on Adela Vásquez stands as model) not only show the entwinement of trans history with sex worker history, but also the direct kinships that are developed around them.[17]

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[15] Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Documentary Is/Not a Name" *October* 52 (1990): 89; quoted in Rodríguez, 177. The direct connection to this reference is to Raquel (another subject of the documentary) and her mental health, and the fact that her explanation of experiencing hallucinations isn't explained in the documentary either.

[16] Minh-ha, 177.

[17] Jamey Jesperson, "Trans Sex Work in Colonial North America: A Herstory," in

This is precisely where I find the book to have the largest impact for a trans reading. If we return to the examples above, we may say that the trans women (or suspected trans women) have some form of kin around them. For Ángeles, she has her long-time partner Esther who states, "*Cuando estamos solas nos amamos intensamente, desde donde somos, desde quienes somos*" (when we are alone, we love each other intensely, from where we are, from who we are).[18] If we look to Chapter 5 on Adela Vásquez we see how Rodríguez herself is Adela's kin. With Rodríguez sharing with a photo of her embraced with Adela, the reader witnesses how *Puta Life* is a work of kin-making and love.[19] Rodríguez consistently shares with the reader that she does not have all the meanings or the only meaning, where "even if Adela, Vanessa … or indeed any of the women I have profiled over the course of this book were here with us now, representing themselves, we wouldn't really know them, not fully. And that is as it should be."[20] Where Rodríguez works from a standpoint of not having all the information (and not aiming to provide all the meanings), she guides our reading through love.

As such, it is Rodríguez' ethical standpoint which holds great value for a trans reading of *Puta Life*. I briefly showed above how Rodríguez implicates herself in the genealogies of *puta* life. She is especially careful in making sure she does not totalize a story for her own purposes, and instead reads a photograph, an interview, a pornographic film, with love and tenderness. Perhaps this might be where I have some suspicion in her trans readings, but it is where

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History of Global Sex Work, ed. Catherine Phipps (forthcoming, Spring 2024).

[18] *Plaza de la Soledad*, directed by Maya Goded (Monstro Films, 2006); quoted in Rodríguez, 175.

[19] Rodríguez, 209.

[20] Ibid., 207.

we learn from Rodríguez a queer affective methodology. Rodríguez speaks to a "sensory encounter," and a lingering as a methodological tool in reading history.[21] By bringing herself into the fold of the narratives she does not attempt to tame the excessive or give pity to those categorized as being excessive. Rather, Rodriguez shows us how we are bound to each other. It may be something as simple as a shared name (as Rodríguez notes, there are many Juana Maria's in the *mujeres públicas* registry – I myself share a name in Dolores with a handful), or a shared history (of Santería, of geography, of upraising). This touching becomes a loving embrace of creating kinship.

The most stunning example of this comes with Chapter 4, "Touching Alterity: The Women of Casa Xochiquetzal." When writing on the photographs of aging sex workers who live in the house, Rodríguez expresses a lot of shame from looking at a close-up photograph of Amelia, one of the residents. The shame she encounters (or, in other words she begins to touch) is femme aging. As she writes, "I am ashamed of how sad this photograph makes me feel, how far away from my own attachments to performances of feminine beauty imagined to be past their prime […] a seemingly universal image of sexy that is far away from us."[22] This sober take on Amelia's photograph is one that Rodríguez does not shy away from, and further, forces the reader to come into contact with as well. And the reading of the photograph does not end there.

If we linger with Rodríguez a bit longer, we would "look more carefully, to look beyond despair, to fabulate other possibilities for the pasts that these women carried with them into this frame."[23]

[21] Ibid., 204 and 211.
[22] Ibid., 146.
[23] Ibid., 148.

In my own experience with this chapter, I saw myself in the photograph of Paola Pacheco Juárez. In the photo she stands naked for the camera, with bold makeup, curved tattooed eyebrows, and a necklace related to Santería. Rodríguez writes that Paola's body bears the traces of "the five children she bore and abandoned […] and she dreams of one day finding them."[24] To me, Paola's small breasts reflect my own and, I am sad to say, her body shape shares similarities to my own as well. While lingering I encounter my own anxiety surrounding my transition that has taken so long already and seems to never end. But, as Rodríguez shows us, the shame we experience as a result of the face of the other (and specifically, another who is excessive) should not leave us unmoored. As such, I also question my own aims towards passing (while being open with my visibility) paired with the need for *puta* aesthetics as something already always separate from my embodiment.

Puta Life teaches us to not read *putas* in tragedy, or as some moral lesson – those stories are everywhere, aimed at controlling the excessive. At the same time Rodríguez does not speak over anyone's story, despite my criticisms. Rodríguez' reading is done through a loving perception to develop kin.[25] As such, when I linger even more with Paola, I see a *puta*. Her makeup is flawless, her Santa Muerte tattoo is badass, and her large ribs pushed forward makes her stand with authority. She does not try to hide her stomach. She holds her sexuality as she ages and looks directly back into the camera with a slight smirk. Through her history, she still looks back at the camera, as a proud *puta* who is still here.

If it has not been noted yet, my own writing is a bit facetious

[24] Ibid., 157.

[25] María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 3-19.

and excessive. My experience as a Latina trans femme is my own. Trans femme embodiment ranges from tomboy to high femme, to everything in between and more. This is one of the reasons why *Puta Life* holds importance for trans studies. As a methodological framework, Rodríguez' work of love and queer affective kinships present us an agential reading of those who live in excess. In the image of the *puta*, she implicates us all. As she says, "this text has invited you to become entangled with *puta* life because you already are."[26] If anything, in my own individual reading of *Puta Life,* I come out of it wanting even bigger breasts, and I am now glad to say, like Juana Maria Rodríguez, I am also a *puta*.

[26] Rodríguez, 212.

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