

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Vanessa Díaz

JVN // Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness. And you know the drill: every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. Do you flip through celebrity news magazines when you're at the grocery store? I know I do. Have you clicked on your fair share of couple reveals, bikini pics and, "Stars — They're Just Like Us!" spreads? Uh-huh. I have, are you talking to me? Have you thought about the people behind those photos? Honey, that's what we're doing today. We are learning about Hollywood's paparazzi and what this profession captures about power, politics, and pop culture in America. Welcome to the show, honey, our expert for this week: Vanessa Díaz, who is an associate professor of Chicane and Latine Studies at Loyola Marymount University. Her first book *Manufacturing Celebrity*, which is published by Duke University Press. Come through, you know, I love an accolade. She examines the history, politics and power of Hollywood's paparazzi. And today we're asking: who are Hollywood's paparazzi? Vanessa, how are you? Are you just, like, thriving, having a gorgeous day?

VANESSA DÍAZ // I am. It's even better now because I'm here with you.

JVN // Not to start off with, like, a personal question. But I did hear our producer say when we were starting that you had said something about gardening. Is there a garden that we need to be aware of? Is there, like, any standout crops that you've, like, become attached to? Like, what is, like, really giving you life this time?

VANESSA DÍAZ // Yeah. Well, I'm Puerto Rican and Italian. So I have what I like to call a Caribbean-Mediterranean garden. So my garden has, you know, Mediterranean classics like rosemary and thyme and, and these kinds of desert herbs. But I also have mango, passion fruit, guava. Right now, we have mangoes growing, and cape gooseberries are ripe. We have Sicilian blackberries that I pick every day. So that's what's happening over here in LA.

JVN // I am so glad I followed my journalistic, like, instinct to ask because that is, like, so different than what we get to grow in Texas because it's just, like, hotter than fucking Hades here. And we just, you know, we're just giving like tomatoes and pumpkins. But wow, your garden sounds amazing. Ok, so now we're going into our questions, I swear. I want to go back to, I think it was, like, 2010 or 11. I'm, like, 24 and I was working at a salon in Beverly Hills, and I really wanted this peanut butter and jelly sandwich that they had at this cafe around the corner. It was the only place that had a peanut butter and jelly if you didn't want to go to Whole Foods and, like, fucking make one. And it was just delicious. So I'm standing there minding my own business. All of a sudden, Lisa Vanderpump herself comes inside. And she's, like, "Honey," and she's got her little, like, British accent. "Could you hold up this newspaper and help me get to my car," because she'd, like, run in off the street because there was just like all these people chasing her. And I was, like, "Oh my God, I can't believe I'm gonna be, like, that person holding a newspaper to, like, prevent a picture, like, this is your moment to shine."

I went outside in front of her holding the newspaper and this guy who was, like, 6'6" and just, like, made of muscle, honey. He came and embraced me in a very aggressive way and not the aggressive way that I love to be embraced. He just kind of picked me up and just put me in the street—not, like, in front of a car. He just was like, so, but needless to say I wasn't that much help. They were definitely wanting that shot. And it was very intense to be in that moment. The PB&J was worth it and I still stuck around for it. I did ultimately get the PB&J. But that's, like, the only experience where I ever had, like—like, every other time I've ever, like, been around paparazzi, like, being a public figure. Like, I've always just tried to

give you, like, face! Trying to be, I was just trying to do in my mind, like, what I think you're supposed to do in paparazzi pictures. Like, but when, like, paparazzi historians, like, think about it, like, when was that first era of, like, paparazzi, like—

VANESSA DÍAZ // Yeah, I would say the sixties and seventies was really when Ron Galella, who, like, he's kind of known as the grandfather of paparazzi image taking in the US. He had famously had this feud with Jackie Onassis and she sued him multiple times, but they also knew each other and those images of her are now in the Smithsonian, which was something that I looked at when I was a fellow there because I'm, like, there's this, you know, on the one hand, this appreciation and value of the historical content that these images take at the same time that these images were taken of Jackie O when she hated this man, right? So it's very layered because the history of sort of hatred of paparazzi is very baked into American cultural history. But the way that it has played out over the decades has shifted. And back then, it was really, like, there was Ron Galella and, like, sort of a couple of his disciples and, and affiliates, so to speak, but it wasn't a whole kind of area of labor, the way that it became, if that makes sense.

JVN // It does! Does each kind of, like, country or, like, area have its own origin story with, like, their own paparazzi? Like, is there kind of, like, a Europe one and, like a—or is it all kind of from here?

VANESSA DÍAZ // It's a very universal story in that, you know, the term “paparazzo” comes from the 1960 classic film *La Dolce Vita*, the Federico Fellini film. That was the annoying news photographer and they called him “paparazzo.” And so that becomes this reference for photographers who are seen as *not* doing news photography, which I would argue is absolutely incorrect. They are doing news photography, they're just not seen as sort of professionalized and going through the formal channels that someone who is either on staff at a news outlet or employed by an agency like Getty or something in any kind of, like, permanent or, or long term contracted way where they have permission on a red carpet. I mean, that's this distinction between red carpet photographers and paparazzi photographers—which, in imagery, like, in popular imagery, they're often conflated but their role socially, historically, and in terms of the actual newsworthiness of what they produce is quite different. Red carpet photographs: you know, you can have 100 photographers taking the same image. You're rarely gonna have paparazzi images where more than a handful of photographers are taking the same image because they're supposed to be unique, newsworthy in the moment. And yet that's kind of what's become the antithesis of what people identify as paparazzi work. They think of it as something that isn't news because these photographers are not real photojournalists, but in fact, the origin story of paparazzo, paparazzi is this annoying news photographer in this classic European film. And so, so we borrowed that.

JVN // Slay. Ok, so the process in 2023: there's, like, the celebrity, then you have a photographer, and then the news outlet—is that who's involved in the process?

VANESSA DÍAZ // That's, I think, the gist of it.

JVN // Oh, and then the consumer! Do consumers count?

VANESSA DÍAZ // In the actual process of getting the image, either in print or online or, or on a news station? I don't consider the consumer as part of that production process, though a very important part of, of, obviously, circulation and cultural practice. But the, the short of it is that, you know, I would say decades ago when there were fewer paparazzi, it was a little bit more homegrown, right? Before the digital age outlets weren't fully digital with imagery until the early two thousands, right? That was this long transition process and even the way that images got circulated among publications, you know, it wasn't until well into the two

thousands that you got to a place where all of the images were coming through digitally to People Magazine, to US Weekly, to CNN right? There used to be a combination. It was, it was a lot different. And so there were paparazzi or photographers in general who would sell directly to outlets. And that really shifted as we got into these huge numbers where with the digitization of images, a magazine might have gone from getting, let's say, 100, a couple 100, maybe a couple 1000 on a really busy day of images that might be considered for publication online or on video or in print to a million a day.

And this happened seemingly overnight. I mean, there was a transition but it happened very quickly, right? And so with that came the kind of beginning of the sort of conglomeratization of photo outlets, photo agencies where the paparazzi as individuals or photographers as individuals couldn't necessarily kind of come to the table in the same way because we're dealing with larger numbers, we're dealing with contract negotiations with major outlets and the outlets needed to limit how many people were they gonna be in direct contact with. And so agencies, which have always, you know, existed but really became *the* way of getting the images to the outlets so that these massive online drives, right? These, like, FTP sites became this entrance point where the agencies that had contracts with different publications would load just thousands and thousands and thousands of their images from different photographers to these sites that then the outlets would say, ok, we want these, we want those then go to the agencies and, and negotiate those prices, usually not being a fixed price. And of course, there's the photographer on the other end of it whose name may or may not even be associated with the image. Most times it would just and still this is still the case most times, the paparazzo or the photographer who took the picture is not evident in the image. Their name isn't there. It's just the agency name credited.

JVN // Like, what are some of the big players, like, would we recognize any of their names?

VANESSA DÍAZ // Right now, I would say the biggest paparazzi image name is Backgrid. That's right now. But Backgrid is the merging of paparazzi agencies that were previously GSI and AKM and these other agencies that then merged together and then kind of continually became more conglomerates. So my guess is most people probably haven't heard of those. Most people have probably heard of Getty, maybe, WireImage, Splash.

JVN // Yes!

VANESSA DÍAZ // And that's not to say that you won't see some paparazzi images come through those channels, particularly Splash. But WireImage and Getty I think are a lot more associated with the red carpet image, the formal events. And that's the sort of brand of image that comes with those names. It's—you might get some paparazzi imagery, but they have tended to come through these agencies that specialize in this. And so you have the photographers who deliver the images to the agencies and then the agencies sell on their behalf. And in terms of profiting, the agencies really wield all of the power. Now, of course, the outlets do, too, because they ultimately can, they can name the price, right? Like, the amount that used to be paid for images prior to the financial crisis of 2008 was on a level just kind of exponentially higher.

And then the agency started to say, "Oh, ok. Well, if we can make hundreds of thousands of dollars on one image, then that's gonna be our bottom line." And then after 2008, the outlets, you know, including outlets like People who were still huge and have huge budgets were, like, "Yeah, we're not gonna pay that anymore," right? So there's that trickle down effect. I would say the agencies have a lot of power that outlets have, you know, ultimately power over shifting the market values. And the photographers are always at the bottom of this food chain and have no say over the cost of their images and, and actually have no way to know if they're actually even getting the cut they're supposed to get. Most

photographers get a cut around the 30% range of their image sales if they deal directly with the agencies, which, which has to do with a lot of factors that we can get more in depth about like immigration status and, and other factors. But the reality is that many paparazzi told me, you know, "I heard that the image sold for this much, I got this cut, but that's me assuming that the agents are telling me."

JVN // So then the person who owns it now, or the entity who owns the image is no longer the photographer, it's the agency. And then the news outlet just, like, licenses its use for those, like, specified things?

VANESSA DÍAZ // Exactly. That's exactly right. The, the one thing that can vary is that there are certain photographers who maintain their rights, but that is something that is rare and that has to be negotiated in their contract with the agencies. And what that means is simply that everything you said is correct, the agencies have rights and the outlets have temporary rights so that the agency can't sell it to another competing outlet if there's an exclusivity clause for say Us Weekly in this case, right? But the photographer can also do with it what they wish outside of those exclusivity clause. But the paparazzo is not necessarily going to have the means to do anything with it because selling to these outlets requires these larger agency contracts. So it really is in the hands of the agents, and it's a little bit more symbolic if the photographer maintains rights, it's kind of more symbolic for them to be able to just have access to their own art. And I, and I do call it art. I think it is important, cultural history, photography, I think that Ron Galella's work is rightfully in the Smithsonian. I think that we have to take this imagery really seriously because it's, it's historical and, and these are actually skilled photographers.

JVN // So one thing that I was thinking is that, like, the Sandoval scandal was coming up for me—like, Vanderpump Rules. I'm sure a picture of them, like, that, you know, shows Tom in some kind of way or, like, Ariana, like, moving out of the house or whatever, that image would be, like, worth a lot more in 2023 than it would have been, like, in '18 or something. Like, what makes the cost or the worth of a picture? Like, is it how many people are talking about that celebrity or you know, that public thing?

VANESSA DÍAZ // Yeah. So this has varied and continues to vary, you know, in I would say the heyday of maybe around 2003 to 2008. And they were, like, that was, like, a really big time for paparazzi images, Britney Spears stuff. All the kind of, like, young Hollywood folks going out all the time and those images were really hot. The Brangelina Twins, their images sold to People Magazine for millions of dollars in the most expensive celebrity photos ever to date at that point. And that was of the children, right? Which is a separate thing. People say, like, "Oh, we shouldn't be photographing celebrity children," but celebrities are very happy to have their children be featured in photographs when there's big numbers involved. You know, that's this question of, like, privacy. When, when does it matter? When does it not, who gets to decide on that? But the funding part, I mean, it's really the outlets that do get to dictate, and that value does come from a combination of the newsworthiness, meaning: is there a controversy, is there a baby born? Is there something that makes the value of the photo higher in a particular moment? And also, does anyone else have it? Right. So that even if Jennifer Lopez doesn't have a big controversy around her, if there's a really sweet photo of her and Ben Affleck doing something in a place that's maybe unexpected, looking great or, or looking terrible—which I, I mean, could never happen for her, but let's just say it did—then the value would be high if only one photographer got that and, and high, I mean, like, well that could range from several thousand to several 100,000 at this point in time. Do you want an example of photo costs?

JVN // Sure!

VANESSA DÍAZ // You know, I'm really into Bad Bunny.

JVN // Who's not!

VANESSA DÍAZ // I teach a course on him. It's, like, my thing. So, you know, him and Kendall Jenner, paparazzi images of them together. I know that one of the sets that came out over the last couple of months—from talking to one of the photographers involved—that, you know, within a week, it had generated tens of thousands of dollars. And that was just off of smaller sales to online outlets. That was before any major print or broadcast had paid for them. So I don't know what the final cost is. I could look into that later. But my guess is that that's going to end up being probably a, a well over six figure set of images.

JVN // Like, the pictures of them, like, leaving one of those clubs together. Like, after—

VANESSA DÍAZ // Precisely, precisely.

JVN // We must talk about the book and how you went about making this book because you embed yourself with Hollywood's paparazzi. Which, like, it's giving, like, 'Never Been Kissed' but paparazzi, like, undercover, like, give it to me. Do you know what I'm saying? So what were some of the most memorable moments from your field research? And also you mentioned earlier, you worked at People Magazine, like, how did that compare? Like, being in, like, kind of from the news side to like your own, like, investigative journalism side? Tell us everything.

VANESSA DÍAZ // Yeah. So I mean, the way that I think about the development of the book was that the, the kind of beginnings of it, well, you could even go back to just me being a kid in LA. I always had, like, you know, anyone in Southern California has some kind of, like, connection spiritually or, like, more literal to this space. I mean, it dominates, it dominates the economy of Southern California, the LA region. I was born in LA. I always was, you know, I was a radio DJ when I was 16. I won, like, a radio DJ contest and I became Vanessa, the Puerto Rican Princess. I mean, I was, like, always in the sort of, like, I had an affinity for entertainment. When I started my senior year at NYU, I was already really active in journalism. I had, I had worked for multiple radio stations, many news outlets, and I met an editor from People Magazine at the journalist conference, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. And I got brought in as a paid intern my senior year of college. And my primary thing was basically to kind of keep an eye on the Olsen twins, who had just started at NYU. And so, you know, I was, like, a token Latina in the New York bureau. There was very little diversity in the space—in the office, on the red carpet. I appreciated so much, like, learning and I was very, you know, I, I really, I love writing, I love reporting. I loved doing red carpet interviews.

I ended up coming back to LA, and I was a stringer, which is basically, like, a regular freelance reporter for the LA bureau of People Magazine. So I was covering nightlife, I was covering red carpets. And, you know, I, I started to notice paparazzi demographic shifting and noticing a lot of Spanish being spoken among the photographers. And I just got to this point where I was, like, "There are so many different kinds of politics around gender, around race happening here. Like, I think that this is actually really important information, and I love being on the reporting side, but I'm gonna go become an anthropologist so I can write about this from a, a cultural anthropologist, ethnographer's perspective and try to shed some light on, like, what is really happening in the celebrity world." Because yes, media is, like, our number one American export and celebrity culture dominates so much of our life, increasingly so. And the different kinds of celebrities now, right? Like, we didn't have TikTokers and YouTubers and all these things a couple decades ago. And now that's like: there's so many different kinds of celebrity. And the number of people who want to be famous, who want to be celebrities is like, what is American culture? So much of it is wrapped up in this. And so that's kind of how I came into it.

And in terms of memorable moments, I mean, for fucking crying out loud, my book opens with these contrasting vignettes of my friend Chris who was a paparazzo photographer getting killed. And my dear, dear friend Natasha, who was a reporter at People Magazine when I started, who I'm still very close with. She confided in me that she was sexually assaulted by Donald Trump in my first interview with her doing research for this book. And I remembered when she did the cover story and I remembered kind of there was, like, some energy, but she didn't tell me until I was doing this research. And that was years before he was running for president. That I, on my computer right now, have audio of Natasha Stoyanoff, who just testified in the E. Jean Carroll rape trial in which he was found guilty of sexual assault. Natasha testified there. So how my doctoral dissertation about celebrity culture ended up being wrapped up with the presidential election of 2016, when she came out with it publicly and was, like, "Hey, you know, all those recordings of me telling you—which she told me on multiple occasions about that sexual assault—well, I might need those now because now Donald Trump's people are talking about suing me and I need to prove that not only did I talk about it, it's recorded, it's time stamped." Like this is how crazy the celebrity system is. This is how intense celebrity power is.

And so, you know, for me, it's, like, the bigger point here is, like, we've been in a moment, since the pandemic started, I think, and since, you know, the 2020 murder of George Floyd and killings of Breonna Taylor and all these people. We're in this moment where we are interrogating structural hierarchies and inequalities. But we do not always think about the way that these same foundational and structural inequalities we see in places like government and law enforcement also impact Hollywood, also impact celebrity culture. It's another one of the primary institutions of the US and it is subject to the same kinds of power dynamics, right? So we see a case like Harvey Weinstein come to the forefront. That's just one example. Hollywood is full of really serious and egregious abuses of power—racism, gender discrimination, all kinds of forms of abuse. Right, like, stereotypes have always come from and been perpetuated by Hollywood. They contribute to our problems, they shape our ideas about race and gender and that's been since the beginning. So if we're going to talk about rebuilding or, or changing or creating new institutions in the US, then, like, we have to reckon with Hollywood as well.

JVN // There is definitely, like, a narrative around paparazzi and we definitely want to explore. Absolutely, this photography is an art; needs to be valued. There's so much skill to understanding, like, proportions, where the light's coming from, what's gonna look better, what's going to make a shot, what's not gonna make a shot—just knowing, I mean, there is so much skill. I always just, like, come down to this place of, like, consent, you know, and, like, and creating situations that are, like, dangerous for anyone. Like, I, I don't want it to be dangerous for the paparazzi. I don't want it to be dangerous for, like, you know, a person who's the subject of the photos. Like, I think, I just, safety feels like a thing for me. That's, like, my only thing—I wish there was more safety.

VANESSA DÍAZ // I very much view paparazzi as very easy scapegoats, right, like, so many people are implicated in, in what I refer to in my book as The Hollywood Industrial Complex. And I use this concept to explain that contemporary Hollywood is this symbiotic web of interrelated industries, including, you know, film, TV, music, online media, print media, media, celebrity management. And that this system constantly generates and promotes celebrity personas in order to stimulate consumption of media at all levels and, and sort of vice versa. And these celebrities are admired and celebrated in contemporary society for being celebrities, for being pronounced worthy of celebration by the very system that manufactures them. And so then the paparazzi are at the bottom of this Hollywood Industrial Complex and, and they're really among the most precarious of entertainment laborers. And so what happens is, it's a really, an easy scapegoat, I think, to kick the people

who are already at the bottom of the entertainment system who are already disparaged instead of actually dealing with the power structures that demand their labor.

This idea that they are large, aggressive men, they get referred to as being sort of, like, "in gangs," the media has called them "illegals." You know, they're referred to as these, like, unskilled migrants. I use a quote in my book where someone calls them, "knuckle-scraping mouth breathers who could be robbing a 7-Eleven, but instead they're shooting with a camera." So it, it's so grotesque, the level of racialization of these laborers. And they aren't doing it because they like the celebrities, because they want to be celebrities. They're not, they're literally doing a job that exists that needs to be filled. And for many of these mostly young men, they don't actually have other viable ways of making money in a city that has so much money to be made in the entertainment industry. And it's, like, someone is gonna do this work. And so if you're someone who is, you know, a, a young Latino who may be documented or undocumented, you don't have more than a high school education.

And you see this Hollywood system that is so lucrative in a city that is so dominated by Latinos, I mean, we, like, Latinos make up the majority of this city. We're 20% of the US population and less than 5% of any on screen roles of any kind, small or large go to Latinos. So to me, it's like looking at the opportunity that, as hated as it is, that for a lot of these guys, and part of the reason they conceptualize themselves often as part of day labor or migrant labor is that perhaps standing outside of Home Depot is literally another option for them. And how much, how much would they be exposed to there in terms of danger? And, and, and I don't think people really grasp the full economics involved here in this calculation. Nobody wants to be hated. But what the paparazzi will say is, "We're already hated." Paparazzi are hated. Latinos are hated. We're, we're, like, young brown or Black men in this country. There's Afro Latinos in this game too. And what are their options?

And you know, I, I have talked to celebrities and seen people, like, I remember an interview I did with Selma Blair for People Magazine where she said, you know, "I really look back at the images paparazzi have taken of me pregnant or with my kid. And I think, like, 'How amazing that I get this photo album of these gorgeous pictures in these candid moments.'" I don't remember the exact quote, but I, I mean, it's a People Magazine article, we could look it up and I remember being so struck by that. And I feel like Gwen Stefani said something similar at some point because the paparazzi actually brought her an album. I remember that. They made an album of all these pictures of her and her kids, and one day they went to go shoot them at the park and they gave her the album. And she was very touched by these really beautiful pictures. And I think that's another common misconception is that, that these paparazzi don't care at all about these people, that they have no feelings and that there is no interaction. There's actually quite a bit of interaction. That's why we can see when people don't want a photo taken, right?

JVN // Yeah. So, but in Manufacturing Celebrity, you note that paparazzi get the best shots when they're invisible, but that invisibility can come with a cost. So what forms of risk and precarity do these photographers face when they are on the job and when they're doing their work?

VANESSA DÍAZ // Yeah, I mean, this is so much, there's, there's so many different levels of, of precarity here. I mentioned Chris Guerra, and I'll speak a little more specifically about this, because this is kind of the worst case scenario, right? He was, he was killed on January 1, 2013. He was trying to photograph Justin Bieber's Ferrari. Justin was not driving it at the time. The details around his death are, are really extremely murky and based on the reports of the California highway patrol officer who was aggressing him. So we, we really don't fully know what happened. It's something that I, I continue to look into and I, you know, have seen photographers get assaulted on the job. I have seen them get arrested, of course, and

I think that kind of along the lines of what I was saying before, when we're talking about a group of already kind of hated laborers, that it's also a, a demographic that suffers from a lot of racism and different levels of kind of persecution.

JVN // Did you notice in your research, like, people who are undocumented versus, like, paparazzi who either have, like, a green card or citizens like, like, did you notice like the people who are undocumented get, like, taken way more advantage of and, like, get, like, shittier deals for their photos and stuff?

VANESSA DÍAZ // Absolutely. So what would happen is that if you are undocumented and you don't have a social security number, then you couldn't be contracted directly with the agency. So you would basically have to find someone else to sell the agency your photos. And then you would just get some flat rate that another photographer would kind of give you and you would hand over the photos. So the potential for making money was much smaller for those individuals. And it's something you had to be really careful about because, you know, my research ended up in a Breitbart article because I did a talk at UCLA where I talked about the fact that some of the photographers were undocumented. And so then Breitbart's, like, "Oh, we need to target paparazzi work. There's all these undocumented people." And I'm, like, "That's not what I'm saying." That's not what I'm saying, but that's what got taken. But yes, they were exploited. And what do they have to show for it? They have to show for it that they produced images that we love all while hating them and their alternatives truly were not better.

There's that and then there's this, this idea of, of yes, of being invisible. And I mean, if we even think about that language of invisibility, right? Like the paparazzo: I have this great image in my book of Galo, who was one of the main photographers I worked with perched in a tree to take a photo. I believe he was taking a photo of Fergie's baby shower. He's in a tree. He doesn't want to be seen. That's risky. But it's to get the shot. Right. And you have to understand too that even in those moments where they are invisible, that doesn't mean that they weren't invited to do so. And, and I'll explain a little bit more about that. But, like for example, there was a situation with one of the weddings for The Bachelor, where all of these paparazzi, the agencies were notified about when the wedding was happening, where it was happening: they asked them to send their guys. A bunch of the photographers I work with went to this public park where they were told to go to shoot, and these security guards proceeded to attack them, hold them in false imprisonment, put them in chokeholds with knees on their necks, while taking their equipment. This was all filmed by the ABC camera crew and this footage was all used to show how interested people were in The Bachelor wedding. "Look how important this was. We had all of these photographers and these security guards had to attack them because they were going to get these images of this wedding and we needed to protect the wedding." These guys were assaulted and this was part of the project of the production company.

This similar thing happened with Nick Lachey and Vanessa Minnillo's wedding, where they made a huge part of their wedding special about all the different ways they had to block Vanessa coming out in her dress so that Randy Bauer who was on a boat of Bauer Griffin Agency, he was out on a boat to get images. Of course, how did he know this was happening? There's so much cooperation behind the scenes. But part of what we get is the performance. We're talking about people who are professionally paid actors here most of the time, you know, much of the time I should say. And I think it's really hard to discern which of these moments are fabricated and which are not. To be photographed is literally to convey importance. We photograph things that are important. Who were photographed over history, the most important people, right? Poor common folk, they were not photographed, they were not painted. And so celebrities, you know, often act like they are horrified by this inconvenience that is ultimately a result of them being so important, so

famous and, and that many times, not all the time and not even most of the time, but many times these are actually moments that are solicited.

JVN // I've actually seen that, too, as an assistant, so many times. I don't want to say who it was for sure because I was just, like, it makes me feel bad. But, like, that person, whenever they would get their hair done would always call to say when they were leaving, if it was the north or the south exit, and really counted on those images circa 2010, 11, 12 to, like, be in, like, those, like, OK! magazines because especially, like, tending to your celebrity status, like, pre-Instagram and stuff, like, which was—I mean, that's and I think that the way that paparazzi are, like, demonized and put at risk that is super fucked up because that is, like, from a wider thing and that, yes, abso-fucking-lutely.

VANESSA DÍAZ // We really do have to look at this larger system that is demanding the images. I am not saying, "Oh every celebrity deserves to go through hell." I am saying, many celebrities choose, in very many different moments, to be photographed and it is very collaborative. And I have seen celebrities—I mean, Kim Kardashian used to call many of the people who I worked with before she was the Kim now. Now they have, they have other arrangements with photo agencies. I mean, that family famously has contracted with agencies to send paparazzi on their family vacations and they get to go through the photos and choose what gets sold and what doesn't. I mean, they, they have so much control there. Talk about consent. I mean, it's, like, at every level, right? Like, what, why is it that we have such beautiful photos of them on a private beach in, like, French Polynesia.

And this question of consent, you know, Britney Spears, you know, she had that Framing Britney Spears documentary that was very good. But it showed her complaining about the paparazzi. And I am not saying that there was no moment in which she never had an issue with the paparazzi. But I can tell you that I know very many photographers who had a collaborative and genuinely friendly relationship with her. She was friendly with a lot of photographers. They would tell me about how if she didn't know where she was going, she would tell them and they would help her get there. They would basically create a kind of motorcade for her to help her get to different places. And she had a relationship with a paparazzo. You know, her boyfriend was a photographer, was a paparazzi photographer. And Will Smith and Jada Pinkett: I remember distinctly when the photographers I worked with were like, "Oh, we have to go to Malibu to this mall" because there were rumors about Will and Jada having issues. And so they called all the agencies they said, "Oh, Will and Jada are gonna go to this mall. They're gonna come out together around this time and we need everyone to get shots of them looking happy and together." Boom. What do you know. People.com, Us Weekly, all over the place: pictures of Will and Jada, the happy couple, they're doing so well. So we, we really, the, the average person only gets the "we hate paparazzi part." They don't get the "No, we're actually using them strategically in very many moments, and in fact, managing our celebrity status oftentimes relies on these moments."

JVN // Because actually, as well, like, I've never been paparazzi-ed, because I don't engage with anyone like that. Like, I don't want to be photographed like that in my private life. Like, I've never needed to be, I don't want to be. Like, and all the times where I've looked like shit like walking around Manhattan. Like I've never been photographed. Like, and I feel like I've, I've been like busted in public before and I've never, I don't want to, like, fuck up my my track. But I do think that that is a huge thing of, like, the symbiotic relationship of, like, celebrities get benefit from it, and photographers get benefit, and the agencies do. It is interesting though, I need to interrogate my own negativity bias because I think also, too, I'm just, like, the part to me where it crosses or becomes just, like, sad is like, when people are profiting and that's not the paparazzi. I mean, these agencies are profiting, the news site like all it's like when people are profiting off of someone's, like, very public demise or, like,

making a mockery of, like, their, like, clear struggles with mental health, like, that, I think is like, but that's also not the paparazzi that's like a much bigger thing. And I feel like the way that, like, men have breakdowns or like different relationships with mental health is covered really differently than the way that, like, women's is. But not—that doesn't matter. And that's, like, no paparazzi's fault. I just mean, like, it just, I just feel like that part sucks. Like there's a through line that, like, human nature sucks. And, like—

VANESSA DÍAZ // Well, I don't know that it's human nature. I think we're talking about really specific kinds of economic industries and systems.

JVN // Exploitation.

VANESSA DÍAZ // Exploitation. And you know, this question; just coming back to this question also of consent. I think it goes hand in hand with these questions about privacy and I want to say a few things because yeah, I mean, first of all, who is profiting off of these moments? Once again, like, what we also start to do is think that every photographer in these certain situations must be a paparazzo. It's actually not the case. So I think about, like, some of the kind of heated moments where I saw paparazzi in controversial times. So, like, when Lindsay Lohan was going through all of her kind of prison stuff and court dates and everyone talked about it, like, "Oh, the paparazzi are swarming everywhere." Oh, no, no, no. That was all kinds of newscasts. That was news photographers, that was paparazzi. That was all of it. And so I think what happens is a media frenzy because we don't like to see people we care about or people we feel are important or people we might feel, we know: we don't want to see them in these frenzied situations that feel hectic, that may create a panic. And they go to the negative association: where we hate paparazzi and paparazzi travel in packs and they're aggressive. Those are paparazzi. That's not always the case. There are paparazzi in there, but they're not all paparazzi. I'm sure that some of those people are sent there from news outlets because that's actually a newsworthy story. And so I think that's part of this, even when red carpet scenes get aggressive people be like, "Oh the paparazzi." Not one of the photographers on the red carpet is a paparazzo. Period. End of story. Paparazzi don't have access to those spaces, but that's the narrative when it gets loud. "Oh, these photographers, they're, these paparazzi are crazy." No, those are red carpet photographers.

JVN // Which, also: huge learning. I did not not know the difference. Like, that is, like, so major. Like, never did I never know the difference. Ever, ever, ever. That is so interesting.

VANESSA DÍAZ // Well, and look, there's a few things to point out there about this difference. And I point this out in my book. If you look at the demographics of red carpet photographers, it's mostly white men, it's white men who are allowed in elite spaces and more women, there are more women who are red carpet photographers than paparazzi. Almost no women paparazzi. But these are elite spaces where the celebrities are in direct contact, where they're regulated. What else happens: because they're regulated spaces where the celebrities are passed through and they get photographed and it's all coordinated. Well, the photographers don't have to run, they don't have to interact in a different way. They're not put in as precarious of a situation than when you have to be on the street. You know, it contributes to this idea of paparazzi being these sort of, like, lawless, anything goes. But it also gets caught up with the demographic difference and the class difference that's therein. Who's on the red carpet, who can be in these spaces? And how these different photos require different levels of, of really putting the body at risk.

You know, the other thing that I wanted to go back to that you mentioned was gender, right? How women having kind of breakdowns or whatever get covered differently from men and you know I mean, I have a whole chapter in my book about body teams. It's like this chapter basically looking at how women's bodies get hyper interrogated at every turn. I

mean, there there was a period, I'm not sure what the exact structure of the magazines are like now, but People magazine had what was called a body team and US Weekly and all these other magazines had equivalents where it was basically, like, a team that ridiculed most women's bodies and that, that was, like, either, "They looked skinny," or "They looked fat," or "what's happening, they had a baby, now we need to make sure they lose their weight and we can focus on that." And a similar thing I think happened or happens with women and their mental state, you know, that there's like hyper vigilance around that. And, and ultimately, you know, this is really something that impacts women in society on a very broad level. And it's, you know, that's the ways in which celebrity culture becomes simultaneously a microcosm of and the perpetuator of our worst problems from racism to sexism to homophobia. All of these things, we see it in celebrity culture, it gets amplified in these spaces. And then it's like, "Oh, why do we have these problems?"

I mean, there was an issue of People magazine that came out about, you know, young girls and eating disorders in the very magazine that I worked for that, I, you know, have a lot of love for, that I think is culturally very significant. But in a magazine that ridicules women's bodies and I'm going, "Oh, all these young people have eating disorders. Well, we have issues about like, 'Did you lose 100 pounds or are you anorexic or like, why is Nicole Ritchie look so skinny today? What about Lindsay Lohan? Are they eating? Are they not? Why do they look fat?'" You know what I mean? And so it's like, of course, this happens and so much of it is, is targeted at women.

You know, and on the consent privacy thing, I think it's really important that there's a couple points. I mean, one is that I think with celebrities that the question isn't so much, do they have privacy or not? It's where do we enforce the privacy? Right: at the level of paparazzi or, or magazines or the consumer? Because magazines and all media outlets have the power to run or not run certain photos. They have the economic power to give more money for certain photos. And so we could incentivize them with the laws like, "We shouldn't publish pictures of celebrity children." And instead, the laws actually target the paparazzi and don't incentivize the magazines to do anything. So that if a paparazzo takes certain photos of a celebrity child, the paparazzo can be sued. The outlets can publish those images and they are not breaking the law. How does that make any sense? Right? It shows that it's just about having a scapegoat. "Okay, we're gonna publish these photos. We're gonna make a ton of money off of it. But you know that photographer who made a couple 100 bucks off of this image while putting themselves at risk for us, they're gonna get sued, they're gonna, you know, get arrested or whatever may happen." And that brings me to the point of, like, is it, is the issue really privacy or is it an ability to monetize, right? And so, you know, I want to help give the fuller picture and the goal isn't, like, "Oh, now you hate the magazines, you hate Hollywood, you hate celebrities or you still hate paparazzi."

The goal for me is you never look at these magazines or Hollywood or celebrity culture the same again. That you really understand that something like Chris's death was the result of these same kinds of institutional practices. We don't even know exactly how it happened, right? It's just that he was an unwanted subject, subject to the same kind of policing that led to the deaths of, of people like George Floyd. Natasha's assault was a result of these practices, right? Gender discrimination, gender hierarchies. So we just, we can't talk about hierarchies and racism and inequality in this country without talking about Hollywood.

JVN // Absolutely. And also what was your DJ title from the competition that you won?

VANESSA DÍAZ // Vanessa the Puerto Rican Princess.

JVN // The journey from, like, Vanessa the Puerto Rican Princess at 16 to, like, Professor Vanessa, I just think is amazing and really interesting. And I think it could be, like, a separate, like, memoir for your second. Like, I just think people would really read it. That's

incredible. I just think, like, the journey is major. So the book came out in summer 2020. Well, I feel like celebrity image production: has it evolved since then? Like, did the pandemic give people, like, more control over their images? And, like, any thoughts on, like, the DeuxMois of the world, like, specifically, like, fan-submitted celeb sightings, like, how has that impacted things?

VANESSA DÍAZ // I think the pandemic on some level gave celebrities more control over their images because we were on lockdown. And so you literally couldn't come into contact with people. I mean, I think about something like the Rolling Stone cover in 2020 of Bad Bunny and, like, his girlfriend shot the cover story because they were together in lockdown. So she becomes the first Latina ever to shoot a Rolling Stone cover. And it wasn't because that's what Rolling Stone wanted. It's because he had to have his girlfriend take the pictures. And I think there are a lot of stories like that where you know, that kind of curation: it gave, it gave an even deeper thirst to people though for that authentic, for that candid for that, you know, one of a kind image, because we wanted so deeply for connection and, and people were in isolation. And so I think it made the post-pandemic demand even higher to, like, have these very intimate photos, I think, of celebrities. Which, I think that there is more control. But there's always gonna be this demand.

Because while we want those, like, you know, bathroom selfies or whatever, we also want the picture they didn't want taken. Like, we choose the best photos of ourselves. We also want to see the best photos someone else took that they think, "Oh, that's the best picture of you." You know what I mean? During the pandemic when we were on lockdown, it was a real crisis like the paparazzi had to reinvent themselves because I mean, they had to start doing things like, you know, food delivery and whatever they, I mean, the same kind of like freelance whatever kind of labor they could get because we were all on lockdown. No one was leaving their homes and if they were there, they were in masks. Even as things started to open up, I know a lot of the photographers got really good at being able to identify celebrities with masks on. And so there were, you know, there was a genre of like celebrities in masks photos or them out in LA doing outdoor activity where you could have your mask off. But so many photographers just had to abandon their, their trade and you know, work in construction, work in the same kind of stereotypically Latino labor that they were choosing paparazzi over.

JVN // Has ever been, like, a freelance photographer union or something?

VANESSA DÍAZ // There's been conversation about it but it's never gained any traction for, for a multitude of reasons. I mean, as you know, like there is a stronghold of union work in the entertainment industry, but there are also very many reasons why, particularly for different kinds of precarious kind of labor, there's a stronghold against having that kind of, of the form. And I think for this type of labor and how kind of deregulated it is, I think that makes it really hard.

JVN // So what does it look like for celebrities to like, not feign hate and like, not feign like a breach of privacy if there hasn't been one or when there hasn't been one? Like, is there any celebrities who do that now or who, like, or be more open about their relationship to it or something?

VANESSA DÍAZ // I've had these rare moments where that's happened, like the conversation with Selma Blair. I think that there are these moments. I think when I have had exchanges with people about this, it's like, literally most people simply don't think about it. They're just, like, "Oh the paparazzi are hated, end of story." There would have to be a lot more interest in, like, a deep reflection. And I think that a lot of the kind of liberal, perceived, liberal politics of Hollywood: they don't really go that deep. It's like, I think a lot of people want to do the right thing but they don't really understand the issues.

JVN // That to me so resonates with the thing I always talk about with blame and scapegoating where like, it's easier to blame and scapegoat. That's like going to Taco Bell not to, not to diminish Taco books. Like, I fucking love Taco Bell. Like, their TikTok is, like, so fucking good and I love their food so much, but it's like—

VANESSA DÍAZ // Send free merch! No, I'm just kidding.

JVN // It's like, send free Taco Bell merch! But it's like, it's easier to just if you're really hungry or whatever, like it's easier to just go through the drive-through and pick that up really quick than it is to go home and like make food and like to me, like the blame is like the Taco Bell thing and really the nuance is like, understand there's like a much larger thing here at play. There's so many factors or so many players and it's, it's never that easy to just, like, level blame and demonize, you know. So, absolutely.

VANESSA DÍAZ // So I wanted to answer your question about the DeuxMoi stuff. Yes. So I mean, just really quickly on that, I mean, in terms of things like the fan submitted celebrity sightings, I mean, I think that this is all part of the same Hollywood industrial complex and now it's just another way to feed the system. And I've been saying for several years, I organized an event at the Getty Center called "Are We All Paparazzi Now?" And I was really thinking, you know, over, I guess about a decade ago, like we all have pretty high quality cameras on our phones now. We can shoot 4K on an iPhone. We can, you know, we can all be paparazzi in any moment. And so I, I think it's, it brings even more critique to this focus on demonizing paparazzi photographers when in fact, like any of us could take images at any time. So how do we know, like when and who is a threat? And in what moments, how do we decide that? What's really behind that at this point?

JVN // So what do you think is on the horizon for Hollywood's paparazzi?

VANESSA DÍAZ // That's a really good question. I mean, I think for them, it's really about constantly kind of reinventing themselves because they're at the whims of market. Like there are fewer paparazzi now than there were before the pandemic. That's for certain. In fact, most of the guys I worked with aren't shooting anymore. Some of them are and they're still doing amazing work, but I think it's harder to get shots. I think people are more protective. I think that post-pandemic life is still not pre-pandemic life. And so it's just, life looks different. So I think they've just had to do so much adjusting. I think it's a, a much tighter market. I don't see, sort of more recognition or protection on the horizon for them. I feel like what we can do is educate about the sort of realities of paparazzi work and the demographics and, and really try to make people understand or help people understand this larger systemic problem that that comes with it being what I call the 'Hollywood Industrial Complex'. I think it helps, I think because we have the language of like a prison industrial complex, that when you put it in this context of like this is a system that benefits and profits off of having people at the bottom. And these are the people who get scapegoated instead of really looking at these larger structural problems.

JVN // Whenever people ask me about how people can be a better ally to queer people, I always think about education because if you don't know what's going on in your own backyard, then it's really hard for you to, like, advocate or so—just even knowing and I feel like I've learned so much today that I literally didn't know. So that was fierce. In *Manufacturing Celebrity*, you quote a *People* magazine prospectus from the seventies that says, "What interests people is other people." So as we move forward to knowing more of what we know now, is it, is it possible to responsibly consume celebrity news and images?

VANESSA DÍAZ // I think that this question of responsibly consuming celebrity news and images is really hard because everything we consume is, like, potentially problematic, right? Like I teach classes on race and media, media production. And it's like, you know, I want

people to look at things critically and I think that's really the the key is is we can look at things critically. We can think about, like, what went into this work, who took the image. If we catch ourselves watching a scene on CNN of Beyoncé and her kids and there's lots of photographers and we say, "Oh, look at those paparazzi, like, 'Oh wait, what did I say? Why am I saying that? I like seeing Beyonce and her kids. What's really the issue here? Oh, who are the paparazzi? Who are we looking at?'" You know, like, asking yourself these questions, thinking critically about celebrity or even thinking about the way that we take images of ourselves and post them. What are you thinking when you do that? What is your goal here? Why do you care about fame? Why do you care about notoriety? What are these deeper kinds of intrinsic issues around fame and status that we're all grappling with every day?

And that kids—I mean, I just can't even imagine having grown up with a smartphone and Instagram or TikTok. Like, I just can't fathom the level of pressure that puts on young people. And so I think we just have to think critically about, about the images, about celebrity, about who we're worshipping—because people worship celebrities. Why are we worshipping them? What does it say about us? What does it say about our culture? And you know, thinking about what to keep in mind when you look at paparazzi images, I think, yes, definitely think about who's behind the image. But also look at the image and think about, "Is the celebrity potentially coordinating here?" I saw a recent set of, of images where I knew immediately it was set up. I could just tell by the way that they were engaged clearly with the photographer smiling at them. I like I, I'm going to call the photographer who I think took the set because I just want to confirm: "That was staged, right? Like, this is too good. Like you were inside a store, photographing them." If you're inside a store photographing somebody and they don't want you there, you're gonna get kicked out and they're gonna know that you, you know what I mean we're gonna see in the picture that you weren't happy about it. So I think that if we actually look at the dynamics of the photos, we can actually see a lot more about this question of consent than we may have previously thought.

JVN // Yes, nailed it. OK. So then you also mentioned earlier that you have the Bad Bunny Syllabus. Sign me up! We, like, can you share a bit about this work? Where can we learn more? Like do we all have to come, like, go to college?

VANESSA DÍAZ // Yes. Yes. So, so the Bad Bunny Syllabus is a website. It's Bad Bunny syllabus dot com. And it came about really organically because a few years ago I had said I, I want to teach a class about Bad Bunny, like, focused on him, but really using it as a vehicle for teaching about Puerto Rico because he forwards so much about the current issues in Puerto Rico right now. It's colonial reality, gentrification on the island. All of these different things that he speaks about in his lyrics that he speaks about in interviews. And he has been doing that since Hurricane Maria happened and devastated the island in 2017. He has been making an effort to really put Puerto Rico on the American map. Ironically, it's a property of the US and most people don't know that Puerto Ricans are American citizens. They don't know that it is a colony of the US. Most people know so little. And so the fact that the biggest musician in the world is from this tiny, incredible island that has such a rich history and culture and, and deep histories of resistance and, and anti colonial struggle. And I think he embodies a lot of it. I don't think that he's responsible for fixing all of Puerto Rico's problems. But I think he's been a really important avenue for bringing attention to the island's struggles. And so I developed this course called Bad Bunny and Resistance in Puerto Rico. And then started getting so much interest in it. And so this syllabus project is basically a way for other people to be able to teach about him or learn about him. It has different sections that look at kind of how he's been an advocate for LGBTQ issues, specifically trans issues. He's been very vocal about trans rights, issues of political activism in Puerto Rico, issues of gender and sexuality, issues of race and racism. So I'm working on

a book about him. I, I can say I recently signed with a literary agency and we're working on a book about Bad Bunny in Puerto Rico.

JVN // Amazing. I love Bad Bunny. Yeah, would you say he's your fave? Top 3?

VANESSA DÍAZ // I would say he is my fave. I feel like I, I live and breathe Bad Bunny because it's not just the music, it's also the, like, education. My kids listen and dance to Bad Bunny. They call me "la profesora de Bad Bunny." If you say what's your, like, your mom? They—we speak Spanish. So, "Oh, like, what's your mom do?" They'll be, like, "profesora" and they say, "de que" and then like, they go, "de Bad Bunny!" because they know I teach a Bad Bunny class. But what was really cool is I don't know if you saw today, the Rolling Stone cover article dropped and it's the July / August issue is Bad Bunny on the cover and I was so happy because I got interviewed for that. And so I'm, I'm quoted in it and the author of the article was like, when we were interviewing, she's, like, "This is so weird. I feel like you must have been listening in on our interview because we talked about things like paparazzi." And he said the same thing, he said when that controversy happened, he was in the Dominican Republic and this fan came up and, like, tried to take a picture with him and he threw the cell phone and it, like, went viral, these videos of him throwing the cell phone and people were so mad at him. And I, my perspective was if that had been a paparazzo, everyone would have been celebrating him, like, "Oh, you know, yay Bad Bunny, you know, did something mean to paparazzo." But because it was seen as like a woman who was a fan, people were on her side and he said something to that effect, it came out in the article where he's, like, "Anyone can be a paparazzo."

JVN // I'm obsessed. Congratulations on the new book. Thank you so much for coming and sharing your work with us so generously. You're incredible. Y'all get into her book, get into her work, Manufacturing Celebrity. It's out now. Vanessa Diaz. Thank you so much for your time.

VANESSA DÍAZ // Thank you. It was so much fun.

JVN // I had so much fun! You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. You can learn more about this week's guest and their area of expertise in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend, honey, and please show them how to subscribe. We love that story. You can follow us on Instagram @CuriousWithJVN. Our engineer is Nathanael McClure, welcome Nathanael McClure, we love you! Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, Chris McClure, and Allison Weiss, with production support from Julie Carrillo, Anne Currie, and Samantha Martinez.

Oh and also this is another true paparazzi story, from just, like, a week ago. I was at dinner with Nicola in London, and then the waiter was, like, "Oh, there's paparazzi outside." And I was, like, "Ohmigod, for me and Nicola?" And then when we walked outside, they only took pictures of Nicola, and they did not know who I was, they did not need a picture of me. And I was doing my little, like, "Ah!" And then I was, like, "Oh," and then I was, like, "Okay, bye, girl!" And then I went and got in my car. They were, like, not concerned with me, at all.