

**If Only For The Length Of A Lucha: Queer/ing, Mask/ing,
Gender/ing And Gesture In Lucha Libre**

Nina Hoechtl
Goldsmiths University of London

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Declaration

The work presented in this thesis is the candidate's own.

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Abstract

This PhD uses a queer reading strategy to explore the performative sites of lucha libre (wrestling in Mexico). My research inhabits the space behind the scene, the space between the ring and the audience, and the space of being part of the audience itself. My reading of the luchas takes place through the camera, the interview, printed works, theoretical investigation, and through the work of artists who draw on lucha libre – including myself. As lucha libre itself cannot be narrowed down to one specific medium, my subject matter allows me to utilize an interdisciplinary perspective to examine its various encounters, spaces, subjectivities and gestures. As well as attending live events in the arenas, watching lucha libre on television, exploring its circulation in artistic and filmic productions and its appropriation in advertisements and political discourse, I have carried out an intervention in a regular lucha libre programme by inventing a character, promoting, constructing and staging a match in an arena in the north of Mexico City. My methodology therefore makes use of a whole range of strategies including those borrowed from the discipline of anthropology and from practices of documentary making. Through my writing and my practice, I attempt to query and complicate these disciplinary conventions and my own use of them.

I place particular emphasis in this PhD upon the possibility and use of a queer reading strategy in relation to lucha libre. Drawing on the works of Gloria Anzaldúa, Judith Butler, Judith ‘Jack’ Halberstam, José Javier Maristany, and José Esteban Muñoz, the thesis argues that a queer reading strategy has the potential to complicate ways of seeing gender and sexuality as well as race, ethnicity, class, time and space in this context. I identify the rich queer legacies within lucha libre, film and popular culture, and focus on the multiple and often conflicting readings made possible by adopting queer theory and reading practices. In doing so, the thesis interrogates the different ways in which popular cultures can go beyond accepted notions of what it means to be Mexican, a woman, macho, gay and so on. Throughout this work, I pay

close attention to forms of audience participation, their verbal and gestural acts and how key these are in to the event of the lucha. These verbal and gestural acts, I argue, produce a unique complicity in the arena manifesting a transient trace of queer histories, and suggesting potential utopias.

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Glossary

Lucha libre	literally free struggle/fight refers to wrestling in Mexico
Luchador	male wrestler
Luchadora	female wrestler
Mini	a wrestler of short stature who generally impersonates the roles of successful wrestlers
Exótico	rough translation: a queer wrestler
Caída	literally, fall A lucha match consists of 2 or 3 falls. The team (mostly made up of 3 luchadore/as) or the individual wrestler who wins 2 of them is the winner. Generally 3 falls take place.
Rudo/a	rough translation: a rude/evil wrestler
Técnico/a	rough translation: a good wrestler, who follows the rules
Llave	wrestling hold
Beso	kiss

I. Introduction

It was during my second or third stay in Mexico, sometime in 2005, that I flipped through television channels and stopped at a station that was showing a lucha mixta (mixed wrestling).¹ I was intrigued by this lucha, where everyone fights against everyone: women vs. men vs. minis vs. exóticos.² Soon after, I decided to go to the Arena Mexico to attend my first matches, to immerse myself in the audience and their reactions. It was the exchange between the luchadoris and audience, and the public's performative participation in the construction of the luchas, which grabbed my full attention.³ The basis of this research is manifold. It can be traced to my interest in the representation of gender and sexuality, specifically in films and popular culture. This project is also intimately linked to my desire to feel immersed in, to grasp and to learn about a social, cultural and political environment in which I did not grow up, but which has become my home in the last number of years. My research has also grown out of my own participation as a member of the audience since 2005: I have been increasingly drawn into the audience's performance through my passion for their involvement and participation. My PhD research project therefore brings together all these interests, desires and passions, allowing me to analyse both the phenomena and role of the luchas, as well my own participation, practice and sense of belonging.

Lucha libre (free wrestling or free fighting/struggle) refers to the practice of professional wrestling in Mexico since the 1930s. Professional wrestling is a transnational sporting form, performed all over the Americas, Asia, Europe,

¹ Nevertheless, within this writing, I will not take a closer look at lucha libre's transformations since it re-entered television, and the ways that some luchadore/a/xs also find to resist the televised image rather addressing and collaborating with the audience. I will discuss though television's influence on the luchadore/a/xs in Chapter One. See Juana Lilia Delgado Valdez, *Las transmisiones televisivas de lucha libre y la 'defensa' de los intereses económico-deportivos del consorcio Televisa* (1997); Heather Levi, "Masked Media: The Adventures of Lucha Libre on the Small Screen" (2001) and Janina Möbius, *Und unter der Maske ... das Volk LUCHA LIBRE – Ein mexikanisches Volksspektakel zwischen Tradition und Moderne* (2004) for a discussion of television and lucha libre.

² In keeping with Gloria E. Anzaldúa's own preference to not use italics because it stigmatizes the italicized words as deviations from the norm, I chose not to italicize Spanish, Nahuatl, German nor any other non-English word.

³ The Spanish language has two genders, masculine and feminine; it has no neutral noun class. In the plural, a group of mixed gender objects will traditionally carry masculine gender. One proposed alternate spelling which allows identities that are not covered by the feminine, or masculine gender is with the ending -is. Replacing -o -a or -e with the letter i does work as much in written Spanish as when its pronounced. See Richard Stallman, "Un nuevo sistema fácil para conseguir neutralidad de género en la lengua castellana," 2011 <http://stallman.org/articles/castellano-sin-genero.html> (March 23, 2012)

and the Anglophone South Pacific, but is most popular in Mexico, the United States and Japan.⁴ Wherever it is found, it follows a particular set of conventions: it is a struggle between two or more wrestlers which involves a wide range of techniques, holds, hitting, running away, bouncing or jumping off the ropes surrounding the ring. All of these actions and more are considered legitimate. The matches are overseen by referees who often are seen as unwilling or unable to enforce the rules against the villain wrestlers. Lucha libre applies these conventions but they have their particular variations that will be discussed throughout this text.

The wrestlers of lucha libre are known as luchadore/as –singular luchador/a– (wrestler(s)/fighter(s)). The Spanish language has two genders, masculine and feminine; it has no neutral noun class. In the plural, a group of mixed gender objects will traditionally carry masculine gender. One proposed alternate spelling which allows identities that are not covered by the feminine or masculine gender and which I will apply within this text, uses the -i to replace -o -a or -e: luchadoris.⁵ Since the inception of lucha libre in 1933, men have wrestled men, and since the 1940s women and exóticos have joined in.⁶ Exótico is a term used to describe the male wrestlers who cross-dress and/or display mannerisms usually coded as female in the ring. The majority of exóticos today identify as gay. The term exótico is related to the Spanish term raro, a commonly used word that roughly translates as “queer”. In addition to these wrestlers, since the 1950s minis or “midget” wrestlers are included. Minis mainly imitate the appearances of successful luchadoris as they wrestle.

Lucha libre is characterized by rapid sequences of holds and moves, as well as high-flying moves. It is also identified through its use of costumes, specifically masks that the wrestlers wear. It is dramatic, acrobatic, violent,

⁴ For example: In Vienna, the city I grew up in, at the Heumarkt, each week wrestling matches took place from the end of the 1940s to 1999. Since 2006 the Wrestling Fightnight can be watched every 4th Tuesday on the Viennese television channel Okto and since 2008 the Wrestling School Austria (WSA) has been attempting to reactivate the Heumarkt. written Spanish as when its pronounced. See

⁵ Stallman, 2011

⁶ Even though luchadoras were not allowed to fight in Mexico City's arenas from 1957 to 1987 they kept on wrestling outside the capital.

role-blurring and especially, a lot of fun and joy to watch. Lucha libre takes place live on any night of the week in at least 10 venues across Mexico City alone. However, what I find especially intriguing as an artist is the way in which lucha libre has served as an inspiration to different cultural forms: appropriations of the luchadoris' image and strategies have found their way into commercials, events, arts and the political arena. It is unsurprising to me that lucha libre has been appropriated and adapted into the various fields of comics, animation, cinema and advertising. It is also unsurprising that people have drawn on it to produce highly popular events that mix lucha libre, comedy and the burlesque, such as *Lucha VaVoom* at the Mayan Theatre in Downtown Los Angeles that has been in existence since 2002, or the *Lucha Britannia* at the Residence Gallery in London, going since 2007.⁷ What makes lucha libre so appealing is the peculiar combination of music, costumes, masks, characters, trained bodies in movement and action, along with their underlying, sometimes less or more, even played out, erotic tension and moral play, with a huge dose of entertainment. But the fact that lucha libre is recognised as an important source for artists and some political movements is a good deal less obvious.

While exploring and questioning why lucha libre has served as such a huge inspiration in many fields, and how its particular strategies and imagery have been applied in political movements or artistic practice, it was while being in the actual arena that I started to wonder about the relationship between movements, gestures and agency. As I watched the luchadoris, their gestures disclosed themselves to be simultaneously a repetition and an improvisation. A hard training was clearly behind it all. But in between the wrestlers' actions and the bodily, gestural and verbal exchange of the audience, I perceived that the luchadoris' bodies were disposed to feel themselves moving through space and to improvise. I began to wonder if a real agency has the capacity to wield itself in lucha libre despite the huge pressure of social, cultural, economic and commercial demands and conditioning? Are movements and

⁷ Keith Rainville, a publisher of "From Parts Unknown" that is a magazine on lucha libre aimed for fans from the USA and Mexico alike, coined the term Lucha VaVoom.

gestures able to produce variations, innovations of and resistance to the expectations and routine: innovations of the bodies that perform this routine, and even perhaps innovations of culture and its conventions?

My research inhabits the space behind the scene, the space between the ring and the audience, and the space of being part of the audience itself. My reading of the luchas takes place through the camera, the interview, printed works, theoretical investigation, and through the work of artists who draw on *lucha libre* – including myself. As *lucha libre* itself cannot be narrowed down to one specific medium, my subject matter allows me to utilize an interdisciplinary perspective to examine its various encounters, spaces, subjectivities and gestures. I attempt to reflect on the multiplicity of framings, writings, readings and practices of *lucha libre* as it has become clear to me that the interface of the self and the social is also created and re-created through these acts of writing, reading and framing. This is even more the case as I consider the act of writing to be a kind of reading. Indeed, ‘reading is always “reading as“ and [my] decision about a [...] frame shapes subsequent aspects of [my] interpretations.’⁸ Through looking at the visual histories, – primarily by the artist Lourdes Grobet– masks, gestures and the juxtaposition of several figures of *lucha libre* characters, such as La Briosa, La Comandante, Irma González, Martha Villalobos, Máximo, Pimpinela Escarlata, Polvo de Estrellas, Sangre Azteca and Superbarrio, I will carve out a context that allows contradictions and possibilities to play themselves out. To explore the complex political fields that intersect in *lucha libre* I will begin here by introducing the case of a social wrestler in Mexico City.

On November 17, 1987, in the front of the Juarez Monument at the Alameda Park in the City Centre in Mexico City, after a major recession in 1982 and a ravaging earthquake in 1985, a man dressed like a luchadori, in red and golden tights, a golden cape, a mask, and the letters S and B printed on his chest was presented to the public. The great character Superbarrio

⁸ Peter J. Rabinowitz, “The Turn of the Glass Key: Popular Fiction as Reading Strategy.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 11 nr. 3 (1985): 421.

(Superneighbourhood) was born. A unity of grassroots organizations under the coalition of La Asamblea de Barrios (The Assembly of Neighbourhoods) introduced Superbarrio as their candidate for president. They did not want to be aligned to any party. Later, however, the recently created coalition of left-wing parties Frente Democrático Nacional (National Democratic Front), among them also dissident members of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), chose Superbarrio as their representative. Consequently Superbarrio decided to withdraw his candidacy from the Asamblea de Barrios and rather to endorse the Frente Democrático Nacional's candidate Cuauthemoc Cárdenas for the presidential elections in 1988. However, as the PRI's candidate Salinas de Gortari won the presidency on July 6, 1988, in yet another national election accompanied by accusation of fraud, the Frente Democrático Nacional decided to join forces to found a new party, the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD) in 1989, appropriating PRI's legitimating symbols as to position itself as the democratic heir of the Mexican Revolution, with Cárdenas as their president. Superbarrio became the official spokesperson of the Asamblea de Barrios in which he is still active today.

Soon after Superbarrio's debut in the political arena, he was followed by the superluchadoris Ecologista Universal (Universal Ecologist), who attempted to stop the Laguna Verde nuclear reactor from being built in 1990; Ecologista Universal was followed by Supergay, who fought for the rights of gays and lesbians; next was Superanimal who spoke up for animal rights; later came Mujer Maravilla (Wonder Woman) who was for women's rights; and finally came Superniño (Superkid) who campaigned for homeless children. There was also the case of Fray Tormenta (Friar Storm), whose story was loosely adapted for the movie *Nacho Libre* (directed by Jared Jess, 2006), and who wrestled for years in order to bring money to his parish through conducting mass in front of his congregation wearing his mask. On October 11, 2009, yet another superluchadori appeared during a protest: Super SME (Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas / Mexican Union of Electrical Workers) took on

Mexico City's police during a protest against the government's dissolution of the state-owned power company Luz y Fuerza del Centro (Central Light and Power, LyFC) in 2009.⁹ Since then the SME, together with Super SME and Chica SME (SME Girl), have been protesting against the government who fired the union's 44,000 members. The LyFC company provided electrical service for central Mexico, where a majority of the population live. Such was the threat of this movement, the Mexican president Felipe Calderon dissolved the LyFC company by executive order and brought in soldiers and the police to expel the workers from the generating stations in 2009. 'Superbarrio, Fray Tormenta (the wrestler priest), [...] Super-Ecologista, [Super SME and Chica SME] are all self-proclaimed "social wrestlers" who have utilized performance and media strategies to enter the political "wrestling arena" of contemporary Mexico.'¹⁰

One of the reasons why lucha libre and its strategies have been so widely appropriated in the political arena, is perhaps that lucha libre brings together a string of forms combining corporeal, media, and performance strategies with wit, skill, agility, strength and discipline, while using space and motion without inhibition. Lucha libre's particular and distinctive aesthetics leave a strong imprint on the viewers' mind. Moreover, night after night, lucha libre embodies the struggle between good and evil in the particular forms of *técniqui* and *rudi*. On first sight lucha libre seems to be morally simplistic and in this sense it is easily understood and no profound examination appears to be necessary. It would seem easy to decide whom to identify with and to receive great pleasure out this identification. However, in the luchas this moral order is, as I will discuss in greater detail in the first chapter, much more complex. Unlike in the famous telenovelas (soap operas), the supposedly good characters do not necessarily triumph, nor are they cheered for. And the supposedly evil characters are not necessarily punished or booed. In this respect, the arena of lucha libre holds much in common with the political arena, where the good are

⁹ More on SME see the blog <http://todosconelsme.blogspot.com/>

¹⁰ Guillermo, Gómez Peña, "The Subcomandante of Performance," in *First World, Ha Ha Ha: The Zapatista Challenge*, ed. Elaine Katzenberger (San Francisco: City Lights, 1995), 90

not necessarily elected, nor the bad convicted. Moral identifications do not simply reproduce themselves through a seemingly clear-cut positioning of good or evil, even as they construct each other.

Lucha libre, I argue, has rather the capacity to invoke a series of seemingly unrelated adversaries, or oppositions: sport vs. performance vs. theatricality vs. melodrama vs. mimicry vs. spectacle vs. action vs. corruption vs. contradiction vs. catharsis vs. ritual vs. parody vs. machismo vs. feminism vs. homosexuality vs. queerness vs. indigenismo vs. mestizaje vs. mexicanidad (mexicanness) vs...¹¹ Importantly, this does not just happen within the ring; it is also the audience's performative participation that constructs these versuses. Versus, often abbreviated as vs or vs., may refer to situations where two parties are opposed to each other in some way – one party is said to be vs. another. Vs. in this context is a synonym of “against”. However, the use of vs. within the luchas cannot simply be read as “against” because the audience and the luchadoris also have to work and fight “together” to make it work. “Againsttogether” is thus necessarily both. The vs. is not simply an “against” as much as it implies a “together”. Collaboration is required in order to establish the dynamics at stake within the arena. To think of the vs. in this way implies an undoing of opposing categories and practices. Like the luchas themselves, this text applies vs. in the latter sense: as an “againsttogether”. This “againsttogether” seeks to challenge seemingly clear-cut moral, theoretical, social or artistic positions. It also opens a space to question the nature of agency in lucha libre, to look at how particular movements and gestures produce variations, innovations and resistance to the routines, conventions and positions embedded within them.

¹¹ Mestizaje is a concept without a direct English-language equivalent, it expresses the tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities of its birth in the New World. Mestizaje also refers to racial and/or cultural mixing of Amerindians with Europeans. Indigenismo, which can be translated with “Indianism”, is a concept without a direct English-language equivalent is a cultural, political, anthropological study and appreciation of indigenous cultures that questions the mechanisms of discrimination, ethnocentrism to the detriment of indigenous peoples. The term indigenismo as used in the Americas was popularized by Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1935-1991) in Latin America in the 1970s to 1980s. See Chapter One. In Chapter Two I will take a closer look at the linked, discursive concept of Machismo, and the figures Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe that have been related to women in Mexico.

I.I Academic Critique Vs. Practice Based Research

In the languages that I am able to understand, there are few scholarly analyses of professional wrestling.¹² In Mexico however, some publications have appeared since the 1970s: a history of 100 years lucha libre in Mexico was published in 1978 by the journalist José Luis Valero Meré, a study on the genre *Cine de Luchadores* (cinema of luchadores) by the film critic Nelson Carro appeared in 1984, and a collection of interviews with luchadoris and fans by the journalist Lola Miranda Fascinetto came out in 1992.¹³ In 1995, Carlos Monsiváis wrote an essay on El Santo (The Saint) as a figure associated with social justice.¹⁴ A few theses have since been dedicated to lucha libre: in 1984 the lawyer Roberto Lascano Guiseppo wrote on labor rights of professional luchadoris, and in 1997, the cultural theorist Juana Lilia Delgado Valdez wrote about lucha libre's television transmissions and defended the economic-sports interests of Televisa.¹⁵ There is little analyses

¹² Roland Barthes, *The World of Wrestling*, 1984 [1972], accessed January 2, 2010, <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~ikalmar/illustex/Barthes-wrestling.htm>, Susan Birrell and Alan Turowetz, "Character Workup and Display: Collegiate Gymnastics and Professional Wrestling," *URBAN LIVE*, Vol.8 2, July (1979), Jim Freedman, "Will the Sheik Use His Blinding Fireball? The Ideology of Professional Wrestling," in Frank E. Manning, ed., *The Celebration of Society: Perspectives on Contemporary Cultural Performance*, (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1983), Henry Jenkins III, 1997, "Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama," in Nicholas Sammond, ed., *Steel Chair to the Head The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), Sam Migliore, "Professional Wrestling: Moral Commentary through Ritual Metaphor," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 7, no. 1 (1993), Donald M. Nonini and Arlene Teraoka, "Class Struggle in the Squared Circle: Professional Wrestling as Working-class Sport," in Christine W. Gailey, ed., *Dialectical Anthropology: Essays in Honor of Stanley Diamond; Volume 2: The Politics of Culture and Creativity: A Critique of Civilization* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992), Nicholas Sammond, ed. *Steel Chair to the Head The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005)

¹³ José Luis Valero Mere, *El Santo, historia de una mascara* (México D.F.: Mexicana de Periódicos, Libros y Revistas, S.A., 1982), Nelson Carro, *El Cine de Luchadoris* (México D.F.: Filmoteca de la UNAM (Filmografía Nacional), 1984), Lola Miranda Fascinetto, *Sin Máscara ni Cabellera. Lucha Libre en Mexico hoy* (México D.F.: Marc Ediciones S.A. de C.V., 1992)

¹⁴ El Santo's wrestling career spanned from 1942 to 1982, during which he became a hero and a symbol of justice through his appearances in comic books (1952-1987) and starred in 52 movies (1958-1982). El Santo's son followed him into wrestling as El Hijo del Santo (Son of Santo). Ulises Delgado and Hugo Ocampo, "El Cine de Luchadoris: Santo el Enmascarado de Plata. Propuesta para su Análisis. (BA Thesis, Universidad del Valle de México, 1994); Carlos Monsiváis, "La hora de la máscara protagónica. El Santo contra los escépticos en material demitos," in *Los rituales del caos* (Mexico: Biblioteca Era, 1995) More about El Santo see Eduardo Canto, *El Santo, la verdadera historia del Enmascarado de Plata* (México D.F.: Editorial Universo S.A., 1982), Noé Cubas Comenares, Santo "El Enmascarado de Plata" y Casanova (México D.F.: Ediciones Latinoamericanas, S.A., n.d.), Leopoldo Meraz, *Santo: el ídolo de una generación (13 años del Enmascarado y la lucha libre)* (México: Editorial Hit, 1955), José Luis Valero Mere, *El Santo, historia de una máscara* (México D.F.: Mexicana de Periódicos, Libros y Revistas, S.A., 1982)

¹⁵ Susana Padilla Coronado, 60 años de lucha libre en México: técnicos y rudos, ídolos de la afición: reportaje (BA Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1994); María Olga Zamora Miguel, "El cartel popular y los medios de comunicación en la lucha libre mexicana" (BA Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1995); Roberto Lascano Guiseppo, "Deficiencias en los reglamentos de la lucha libre profesional y los derechos laborales

on an international level about lucha libre, and while there is some in Mexico I do not consider that they challenge the complexities of lucha libre thoroughly enough.

Most significant of the existing literature on lucha libre for me however, was already published in 1940 by Salvador Novo (1904 – 1974). Novo was a writer, poet, playwright, translator, television presenter, entrepreneur, and the official chronicler of Mexico City, and wrote a short but very insightful essay *Mi Lucha (Libre)*.¹⁶ Novo publicly performed his own homosexuality and recorded it in his memoir, *La estatua de sal (The Statue of Salt)*, published posthumously in 1998. Novo, who was very critical of the brutos [brutes] – the revolutionaries such as Zapata or Villa’, who exploited the language and images of popular culture to institutionalize the Revolution in the 1920s and 1930s, and wrote *Mi Lucha (Libre)* a few years after lucha libre’s inception in Mexico.¹⁷ Throughout this dissertation I will come back again and again to his essay.

As I will explore in the first chapter, lucha libre has undergone a complex series of transitions since its beginnings. Since the new millennium however, it (re)entered ‘higher class’ spaces of the city with, amongst other things, the openings of El Santo paraphernalia shops at the airport and in the gentrified neighbourhood of Condesa in Mexico City. In this vein, a renewed interest in lucha libre has started and it has become an increasingly popular topic for scholars. For examples, the journalist Norma Irene Hernández Aguilar wrote a thesis in 2009 on luchadoras in the ring.¹⁸ In the same year the literary and

de los luchadores profesionales” (BA Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1984); Juana Lilia Delgado Valdez, “Las transmisiones televisivas de lucha libre y la defensa de los intereses económico-deportivos del consorcio Televisa.” (BA Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1997)

¹⁶ Salvador Novo, 1940, “Mi Lucha (Libre),” in *La Vida en México en el Periodo Presidencial de Lázaro Cárdenas* (Mexico City: Empresas Editoriales, 1964)

The title of his essay, *Mi lucha (libre)* may well be a pun on Adolph Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* that was published in Spanish in 1935 as *Mi lucha*. Adding the word libre transforms “my struggle” into “my wrestling match”.

¹⁷ Héctor Rubalcava Domínguez, *La modernidad abyecta* (Vera Cruz. Universidad Veracruzana, 2001), 148-149
Translation from Spanish: ‘brutos – los revolucionarios como Zapata o Villa’

¹⁸ Norma Irene Hernández Aguilar, “Damas del cuadrilátero. Reportaje sobre la lucha libre femenil en México,” (MA Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2009); Sara Carolina Cruz Mendoza, “Prototipo profesional de entrevista : trayectorias en la lucha libre mexicana,” (BA Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2011), Manuel Domínguez González, “La lucha libre y las consecuencias en el aficionado ¿catarsis o estimulación a la violencia? ¿verdad o teatro? su efecto mediático: reportaje,” (BA Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México,

cultural theorist Esther Gabara wrote an essay titled *Fighting It Out: Being Naco in the Global Lucha Libre* and the performance theorist Antonio Prieto Stambaugh produced a text on lucha libre as actions of theatricality and performance.¹⁹ In 2012, a richly illustrated book on *Cine de luchadoris* was released.²⁰ Moreover, three major books on lucha libre have been published: *Und unter der Maske ... das Volk LUCHA LIBRE – Ein mexikanisches Volksspektakel zwischen Tradition und Moderne* (Behind the Mask... Common People. Mexican Free-Style Wrestling. A Mexican Popular Show between Tradition and Modernity, 2004) by performance theorist and documentary filmmaker Janina Möbius, the *Espectacular de Lucha Libre* (Lucha Libre: Masked Superstars of Mexican Wrestling, 2005) by Lourdes Grobet, and *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity* (2008) by the anthropologist Heather Levi.²¹

Of these recent publications, the work of Janina Möbius and Heather Levi are most important for this thesis. Möbius interprets lucha libre as a form that has, since the 1940s, offered guidelines, identifications as well as forms of Selbst- und Fremdbilder (self-perception and perception by others). She argues that as in many historical moments of social and cultural transition to modernity, Mexican modernity in the 1930s simultaneously drew on conservative and/or traditional discourses. Möbius thus understands lucha libre as a Brückenphänomen (bridge phenomena) that mediates between tradition and

2010), Sonia Gabriela Hernandez Portillo, "La defension juridico laboral del luchadori profesional ante el trabajo que realiza," (BA Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2000), Carlos Gabriel Martinez Barrera, "La empresa mexicana de lucha libre y sus transmisiones por television," (BA Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2003), Alberto Alejandro Meza Espinosa, "El mito del héroe en la construcción del personaje en la lucha libre mexicana," (BA Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2010), Christian Alejandro Ruiz Ortega, "Lucha libre mexicana : un análisis situacional del deporte de los encordados," (BA Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2011), Héctor Sinuhé Valdés García, "Plan de identidad corporativa para el Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre," (BA Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2010) This is not, by no means, a comprehensive list.

¹⁹ Esther Gabara, "Fighting It Out: Being Naco in the Global Lucha Libre," *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, Mexico Issue 26 (2009): 277-300.; Antonio Prieto Stambaugh, "¡Lucha libre! Actuaciones de teatralidad y performance" In Domingo Adame, ed., *Actualidad de las artes escénicas. Perspectiva latinoamericana*, (México: Universidad Veracruzana – Facultad de Teatro, 2009)

²⁰ José Xavier Návar, Rafael Aviña and Raúl Criollo *¡Quiero ver sangre!: Historia ilustrada del Cine de luchadoris* (Mexico D.F.: UNAM, 2012)

²¹ Lourdes Grobet, *Espectacular de Lucha Libre* (México D.F.: Trilce Ediciones, 2005); Janina Möbius, *Und unter der Maske ... das Volk. LUCHA LIBRE – Ein mexikanisches Volksspektakel zwischen Tradition und Moderne* (Frankfurt/Main: Vervuert Verlag, 2004); Heather Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre. Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008)

modernity.²² Möbius focuses on four possible readings of lucha libre: (1) lucha libre as sport, (2) as a form of folk theatre, (3) as ritual, and finally, (4) lucha libre as a TV-show. Consequently, she highlights the fact that it does not make sense to reduce lucha libre to one frame. Rather, she sees lucha libre as a combination of diverse forms that share complex and incoherent physical and verbal movements in excess and immediacy that are not easy to grapple with or comprehend.

Heather Levi by contrast, not only analyses lucha libre in her research but she also became a practitioner of lucha libre. Through her research and experience, Levi brings out five central contradictions and tensions that she sees in Mexican wrestling and Mexican social, political and cultural life: (1) the tension between the rural and the urban, (2) the contradictions of tradition and modernity, (3) between ritual and parody, (4) between machismo and feminism, and finally (5) the tensions between politics and spectacle.²³ Levi suggests however, that it is luchas libre's generic ambiguity 'that makes it an ideal format for the staging of contradictions.'²⁴ Lucha libre, she argues, integrates a range of ideas about agency, power, modernity, gender and national culture: 'It both is and is not a sport. As such, it both is and is not associated with a set of ideas about modernity and the Mexican nation-state.'²⁵ This argumentation is significant as it allows contradictions to stand together rather than excluding each other. Levi furthermore considers lucha libre as a spectacle that informs our understanding of spectacles in the political arena. This is a spectacle that functions within the world of popular entertainment in which it becomes clear that lucha libre is in fact a performance in the field of sport. In the third chapter I will draw on Levi's observations to explore lucha libre as an "againsttogether" of sport that is not just visual, but also affective, creating a space full of force and vulnerability. Both Möbius and Levi examine questions of gender in lucha libre. Möbius argues that, although there are women wrestlers, as a discourse and as a

²² Möbius, 2004, 38

²³ Levi, 2008, xiii

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 26

²⁵ *Ibid.*

spectacle lucha libre remains one of masculinity.²⁶ Möbius and Levi examine the roles of women wrestlers and of los exóticos and their affirmative, subversive or contradictory performances in relation to social role models. However, neither writer discusses what I argue is the inherent queerness of the luchas. They largely ignore Novo's observations in *Mi Lucha (Libre)* that lucha libre challenges class, gender, sex, race and ethnicity.

Another key observation in Novo's *Mi Lucha (Libre)* was his insistence on lucha libre as a form of art that actually 'resists all academic critique'.²⁷ This resistance to academic critique for Novo is linked to questions of sexuality and the impossibility of finding a position from which to objectively analyse what takes place in lucha libre in the context of 1930s Mexico City. In the early 1920s, Novo enrolled at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM) to study law. He did not pursue this career however, and decided instead to focus on writing.²⁸ In his biography on Novo, Carlos Monsiváis points out that since gay people were not visible in Mexico City at this time, 'the catacombs, [... became] his "University of Life", where the-ones-of-the-other are already wandering with rigorous nocturnal discipline'.²⁹ Novo, who experienced underground life as a university, considered the luchas to resist the classical interpretive strategies that academics apply to literary arts. In this sense, he argued that no distanced, analytic interpretation would ever unravel them. However, as he dwells in the catacombs and goes to the luchas, we are invited to join him in these scenes.

Novo provokes for me, questions about how it is possible to approach lucha libre and what it is possible to say or do with them, beyond 'unravelling' or de-

²⁶ Möbius, 2004, 47

²⁷ Novo, 1964, 600

Translation from Spanish: '[...] las luchas libres resisten a toda crítica académica.'

²⁸ The introduction to Salvador Novo's *The War of the Fatties and Other Stories from Aztec History* (1994) by Michael Alderson offers a brief, but excellent overview on Novo's writing career, his involvement in the writers' group *Los contemporáneos*, the support Novo received by the linguist and historian Pedro Henríquez Ureña and José Vasconcelos, and Novo's close alignment with the government and media after the repression of social movements in the 1960s and 1970s.

²⁹ Carlos Monsiváis, *Salvador Novo: Lo marginal en el centro* (México D.F.: Ediciones Era, 2004), 43

Translation from Spanish: 'las catacumbas [...] son su "Universidad de la Vida", los-de-los-Otros ya deambulan con rigurosa disciplina nocturna'

coding their actions. I seek to depart from Novo's observations by applying a variety of research strategies to experience, read and work nearby the luchas. In combination with the key theoretical figures Gloria Anzaldúa, Judith Butler, Judith 'Jack Halberstam, José Javier Maristany and José Esteban Muñoz, I intend to offer a framework that introduces new insights, knowledge and understanding of lucha libre. I wish to inhabit and take on the complex relations between the luchas, their masks, performances and audience, and work through a kind of vs., an "againsttogether" of my own. This, I argue, can only be experienced by joining in, as Levi and Lourdes Grobet have before. Immersing themselves in the luchas and interacting in different spheres of experience, their practices, as lucha libre practitioner and photographer respectively, hugely informed their approach to their ostensible subject matter. In other words, I would consider their practices as instructive for this research, as the words that are written in the various studies of lucha libre. In my own work I seek to actively develop situations that create an "againsttogether" of composition and situation – an "againsttogether" of the luchas' intentions and of the receptive and interactive participation of the audience, as we will see in the last chapter.

Of particular importance to my research are the photographs of Lourdes Grobet. From 1980 to 2002, Grobet produced a series of photographs of lucha libre, which was finally published in 2005. The book is a mixture of images of luchadoris as they prepare for their matches, leave home, arrive at the arena, sign autographs, and wrestle. While Grobet worked on the film sets of the Cine de Luchadores, she photographed El Santo in between shoots: for example, while he eats icecream. There are posed studio portraits, shots in the luchadoris' homes and photographs of the arenas, the promoters, the vendors and the fans. As Grobet seeks to reflect lucha libre in its cultural-political history, she also takes images of the danzas del tigre (tiger dance) in Zitlala and the social wrestler Superbarrio. The book opens with an essay by Carlos Monsiváis and in between the photographs, newspaper articles from the time give an insight into how lucha libre was perceived by the press.

Grobet's work is a really valuable, dense visual insight of lucha libre, and her photographs, as I will go on to explore in the first chapter, cut through the aesthetics and politics of/in the luchas. Esther Gabara observed that Grobet's 'engagement with the wrestlers and their public led to a refined understanding of who constituted this form of [...] popular culture.'³⁰ Moreover for many, Grobet's photographs are the first contact with lucha libre. The artist Rubén Ortiz Torres states that his 'first introduction to the world of wrestling came from [her photographs]'. It is hard for him to distinguish between them and the history of professional wrestling in Mexico. I could not agree more: Grobet's photographs are intertwined in its history and reading.

While my research attempts to bring together a more distant past with a near present without extensive historical analysis, I do consider it important to provide some historical contextualization of lucha libre. My research draws from a series of figures that exchange glances and gestures, addressing one another and, hopefully, you the viewer/reader across time and contexts in particular ways. In this PhD, I speculate as to whether the modes of address, encounter and performance that I see and produce might have the potential to constitute a temporary community. I do not want to merely describe the possibility of meaningful encounters and the emergence of a community but also to envision it and to see how it feels. In the arena strange new social formations take shape, people who would not normally be together are there, and they do things they would not normally do. Groups of people without fixed identities, passionately produce an energy that leads to an exchange of gestures which in turn, communicate both the impossibilities and potentials of communication and reciprocity.

Even though throughout this text I will do a closer reading of Grobet's photographs, certain elements of lucha libre, such as the different designs of the masks or the variety of llaves (wrestling holds) (Fig. 2) will not always be described in detail. Instead, I will place images throughout the text that will

³⁰ Gabara, 2009, 284

give a sense of this visual culture.³¹ The images of the masks (Fig.1) are taken from my poster project *¿LUCHA IDENTIDAD - ROL LIBRE? EN UNA DISPOSICIÓN INCOMPLETA Y DESCRIPTIVA* (*¿IDENTITY LUCHA – A FREE ROL? IN AN INCOMPLETE DESCRIPTIVE ORDER*, 2008) and were sited at various arenas throughout Mexico where they were placed on walls with other posters advertising lucha libre matches. The posters show the existence –or as well the absence– of women in lucha libre’s history in Mexico. During my research it was very difficult to receive detailed information about the luchadoras (when did they live, fight and lose their mask), nor to find photos from the masks that have been used by them. The practice of drawing masks based on descriptions and recollections of the luchadoras, allowed me to reconstruct some of the masks, even though there were no pictures or records of them. The result is a fragmented and incomplete order of masks, however it allows for a first insight of some of the luchadoras who have been wrestling in Mexico.



Fig. 1

I argue that lucha libre demands a kind of practice based research. As pointed out, Levi and Grobet are good examples of such approach, and their works offer valuable insights on lucha libre. However, by combining the “againsttogether” with a queer reading strategy I seek to challenge seemingly clear-cut moral, theoretical, social or artistic positions and to give space and time to the complexities of lucha libre.

I.II Positioning Vs. Naming

In March 2009, I was invited by the author Guillermo Fadanelli to write an article on the diversity of gender in Mexico for the weekly magazine *DÍA*

³¹ The images of the *llaves*, done by myself, are based on the photos by Rosalío Vera in the publication *101 LLAVES Y LANCES ESPECTACULARES DE LA LUCHA LIBRE* (Mexico D.F.: Grupo Expedicion, 2009) and are influenced by Carlos Verduzco’s illustrations in Carlos Hoffmann’s publication *Lucha Libre* (Mexico D.F.: Editorial Olimpo, 1960).

SIETE, a supplement of several newspapers.³² At the beginning I was reluctant to accept as I felt I would not be the right person to do so, and that my Spanish would not be sufficient. In addition, as is also the case with this dissertation, I had to face the difficulty of how I could write without appropriating or ‘othering’ others. After a conversation with Guillermo, I made the attempt to write a text that would not get stuck in an individualist perspective but could rather be considered as a form self-representation that enables a speaking not ‘about’ or ‘for’ others, but ‘nearby’, as Trinh T. Minh-ha has defined it.³³ I wrote about how I had experienced some traces of the representation of gender in Mexico so far, about personal surprises, conversations with luchadoris exóticos, performers, the fichera subgenre that included male and female, hetero- or homosexual, transvestites, drag queens and effeminate gay men, and I wrote about a campaign of the LGBTTT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transvestites, Transsexual) community in 2007.³⁴ The article opened with the following words:

Maricón, mayate, puto, puñal, joto, tortilla, chacal, loca... - I was impressed when I realized the great variety of words that people use in Mexico to call someone gay. These words made me realize the complexity of homosexuality in Mexican society. They are an indication of how rich and varied the understanding of sexuality presents itself in this culture.³⁵

After the article was published, I received reaction from the people that I had mentioned and contacted during writing. In general they were positive, but one of the performers pointed out that she would have preferred a different beginning. Asking her why, she explained that she does not want her mother to read these words in relation to herself. These words hurt her mother. I immediately apologised, as I was surprised and ashamed. I knew that she

³² such as EL UNIVERSAL, EL INFORMADOR, PULSO, VANGUARDIA, HI- DROCÁLIDO DE AGUASCALIENTES, LA VOZ DE MICHOACÁN, CRÓNICA DE MEXICALI, NOTICIAS DE OAXACA, EL SUR DE ACAPULCO.

³³ Minh-ha T. Trinh, *Reassemblage*, 40 mins. (Senegal, Women Make Movies, 1982), 16mm/DVD

³⁴ The term fichera relates a fichera, a female cabaret dancer who receives a ficha for each drink her customer consumes. The dances with her are frequently the prelude to a sexual encounter.

³⁵ Höchtl, 2009, 28

Translation from Spanish: ‘Maricón, mayate, puto, puñal, joto, tortilla, chacal, loca... – quedé impresionada cuando me di cuenta de la gran variedad de palabras que la gente usa en México para decir que alguien es ‘gay’. Estas palabras me mostraron lo complejo de la homosexualidad en la sociedad mexicana, son indicio de lo rico y variado que se presenta el entendimiento de la sexualidad en esta cultura.’

used some of the words herself but, without a doubt, it has different implications depending on where, when, in what way and by whom they are applied and if they are written down and/or printed. This incident made me think more deeply about the complexities of naming and categorizing. Naming, be it a classification or an emphasis, draws a border and thus in/excludes. It 'is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm.'³⁶ The philosopher Judith Butler explains further that 'the name mobilizes an identity at the same time that it confirms its fundamental alterability. The name orders and institutes a variety of free-floating signifiers into an "identity"; the name effectively "sutures" the object.'³⁷ While I largely agree with Butler, I would argue that naming does not necessarily always partake in hegemonic relations. However, it is clear that there is the real danger of exclusion and devaluation in using such names, as many of these terms exist precisely as tools to do just that.

By contrast, the philosopher Tuija Pulkkinen argues that naming can also be a way of bringing into visibility that which is not, cannot, or has not been recognised. She argues for a 'politics of assigning the different positions names, and in this way granting them a socially recognized existence.'³⁸ While Butler focuses on the resignification of existing names and social positions, Pulkkinen rather understands the attribution of names to 'different positions' as a way of naming positions that had been previously unnamed or unintelligible. Naming therefore can be understood here in two ways: both as the re-iteration and possible re-signification of names that already exist and as a proposition of the possibility that thus far unknown positions and forms of identity may appear in the social space. In the anecdote above, these two ways of thinking rub strongly "againsttogether". They are important to my project, as we will see that the term queer rather than positioning *lucha libre* in the frames of *mexicanidad* and *machismo* amongst others, might allow me to grasp the *luchas'* conditions set by its very own ambiguity and contradiction.

³⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"* (New York, London: Routledge, 1993), 8

³⁷ Butler, 1993, 208

³⁸ Tuija Pulkkinen, 1996, *The Postmodern and Political Agency* (Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän UP, 2000), 173

The problem of naming becomes even more complicated when working through terms in languages that are not your first. This is exactly the case within this dissertation. I write in English, even though my first language is German. I do interviews in Spanish and I translate from German and Spanish into English. Initially I went to English via German and to Spanish via English - nowadays I would call my English a Spermanglish. Most of the Spanish terms can be easily translated into English. Sometimes however, terms are very particular and difficult to translate. Throughout this dissertation, in order to underline the specificity of some terms within this context, I will keep them in Spanish. This dissertation deals not only with the framing and translations of the ostensible 'subject matter' I am dealing with, but also implicitly with questions of language and translatability, including the use and meaning of specific words and names that are crucial for understanding *lucha libre*. In doing so, I accord with the cultural theorist, writer and poet Gloria E. Anzaldúa, who has strongly argued that non-English words are not italicised.³⁹ I do not therefore italicize Spanish, Náhuatl, German or any other non-English word here. Anzaldúa, whose writing I will come back to throughout this dissertation, considers such italics to have a 'stigmatizing function and make the italicized words seem like deviations from the [...] norm.'⁴⁰ In a similar vein, Trinh states that:

The question as to when one should 'mark' oneself (in terms of ethnicity, age, class, gender, or sexuality for example) and when one should adamantly refuse such markings continues to be a challenge. For answers to this query remain bound to the specific location, context, circumstance, and history of the subject at a given moment. Here, positionings are radically transitional and mobile. They constitute the necessary but arbitrary closures that make political actions and cultural practices possible.⁴¹

Without a doubt, there is an "againsttogether" around positionalities at stake. It

³⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009)

⁴⁰ Anzaldúa, 2009, 11

⁴¹ Minh-ha T. Trinh, *elsewhere, within here. immigration, refugeism and the boundary event* (London, New York: Routledge, 2011), 51

is about the instability of namings: several meanings continue to overlap. They are wrestled over in transformative processes, during which it is a challenge not to get stuck in re-iteration, re-appropriation, re-signification as counter positions that simultaneously build on and attempt to get rid of their derogative connotations. They depend on the interrelatedness of who, what, when, where and how within which political actions and cultural practices may happen. In this sense, not italicising words from different languages, as within this text, can be a strategy to refuse markings as Trinh points out in the first part of her quote.

Trinh's statement and writings in general have made me think a great deal about my positionings within this project. This dissertation involves a number of practices at times, as is common in much contemporary art, and has involved my own appropriations of certain strategies from non-artistic disciplines. Besides attending live events in the arenas, watching lucha libre on television, exploring the circulation of lucha libre in artistic and filmic productions and its appropriation in political discourse, I have carried out interviews with wrestlers, referees, promoters, reporters and spectators. I have also made art works (posters, sound works, photographs, texts and videos) that draw from lucha libre, its spaces and its visual culture, and I have carried out an intervention in a regular lucha libre programme by inventing a character, promoting, constructing and staging a match in an arena in the north of Mexico City. My methodology therefore makes use of a whole range of strategies, including those borrowed from the discipline of anthropology and from practices of documentary. However, in this dissertation, through my writing and my practice, I attempt to query and complicate these disciplinary conventions and my own use of them. In this process I intend to keep alive the challenge of naming: its instability as several meanings continue to overlap – the interrelatedness of who, what, when, where and how naming takes place.

I.III My Positions as States of Vulnerability

The Artist as Ethnographer Vs. The Artist as Anthropologist *Engaged*
Vs. The Artist as Vulnerable Observer Vs. The Artist as Affective
Participant

In an influential essay in 1996, art critic and historian Hal Foster proposed the figure of the “artist as ethnographer” who collects and (re)presents material based on observations of human society and of the other: ‘It is the cultural and/or ethnic other in whose name the artist most often struggles’⁴². He adds that there is,

... no doubt the othering of the self is crucial to critical practices in anthropology, art and politics; [...] for then the as now self-othering can flip into self-absorption in which the project of an “ethnographic self-fashioning” becomes a practice of a narcissistic self-refurbishing.⁴³

Foster is concerned with the problematic of identification and the question of either “too much” or “too little” distance between the artist and the issues or groups with which they work. Consequently, he calls for a reflexivity that ‘attempts to frame the framer as he or she frames the other.’⁴⁴ This involves an acknowledgment that framing is, like projecting and self-absorption, unavoidable because in every step of the working process a transformation takes place. In other words, a certain form of abstraction occurs: certain parts get lost or (consciously and/or unconsciously) erased.

The artist Joseph Kosuth proposed an alternative model of the artist as a model of the anthropologist *engaged*:

The artist acquires the kind of tools that the anthropologist is concerned with trying to obtain fluency in his/her own culture. On the one hand the artist attempts to affect the culture while [s/]he is simultaneously learning from (and seeking the acceptance of) that culture which is affecting him [her].⁴⁵

⁴² Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer”, in *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 173

⁴³ Foster, 1996, 180

James Clifford addresses the issue of “ethnographic self-fashioning” in James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988)

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 203

⁴⁵ Joseph Kosuth, “The Artist as Anthropologist,” in *Art After Philosophy and After, Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed.

With this position Kosuth might fall into the trap of 'self-absorption', especially with his emphasis on the artist obtaining fluency and seeking acceptance. But he also hopes 'for this understanding of the human condition [...] [that] utilize[s] the state of our constituted interaction.'⁴⁶ Both Kosuth and Foster's views depict contradictions inherent to this way of working. By implicitly challenging the position of the anthropologist or ethnographer (and their disciplinary modes of framing and engagement), artists put themselves in an awkward position: a judgemental "against" position, rather than an "againsttogether" position of simultaneously applying and undoing anthropological and ethnographic imperatives. I do not want to exploit difference or working relationships, but I do want to investigate the "againsttogether" that causes tension and vulnerability, between documentary and abstraction. Consequently, like Miwon Kwon, I want to know how are 'artists enabled or disabled by the ways in which ethnographic imperatives reorganise their practice'?⁴⁷

In the same year as Foster's "Artist as Ethnographer" essay appeared, the anthropologist Ruth Behar proposed an anthropology that is lived and written in a personal voice. She proposes the concept of the "vulnerable observer", a position that applies not only to the subjectivity of the researcher, but also to the research methodology itself. In the following passage from the sociologist Rosanna Hertz I replaced the term "ethnographer" with the term "artist" as a small experiment to see if the development of a self-reflexive research and production practice is as relevant for artists as it is for ethnographers and anthropologists:

To be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment. By extension, the reflexive [artist] does not simply report 'facts' or 'truths' but actively constructs interpretations of his or her

Gabriele Guercio (London and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1975), 120

⁴⁶ Ibid., 121

⁴⁷ Miwon Kwon, "Experience vs. Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the Works of Lan Tuazon and Nikki S. Lee," in *Site-Specific: the Ethnographic Turn*, ed. Alex Coles (London: Black Dog Press, 2000), 75

experiences in the field and then questions how those interpretations came about. [...] By bringing subject and object back into the same space (indeed even the same sentence) [artists] give their audiences the opportunity to evaluate them as 'situated actors' (i.e., active participants in the meaning making creation).⁴⁸

In other words, when the artist strives for a responsible engagement as s/he interprets and creates by simultaneously reflecting on the process that the audience can access if the 'situated actors' are actively involved. It is through the parallel subjective experience/interpretation of both artist(s) and audience, rather than their indifference or detachment, that makes reflexivity possible. Although it might run the risk of overvaluing the category of "personal experience" as the basis of reliable knowledge of culture and the self, I consider the concept of vulnerability really useful and fitting for thinking about and complicating my position as a 'situated' artist in the arena of *lucha libre* in Mexico.⁴⁹ In the following section of this introduction, I want to explore what this position or state of vulnerability might be and how it inflects the practice and research of this dissertation. The notion of vulnerability operates here as a self-reflexive attempt to work with and nearby the *luchas* and their complex social and historical dynamics, in which differences are embedded in overlapping fields of power.

Within the field of art, vulnerability has not been discussed a great deal, except for in the writings of Brazilian psychoanalyst, curator and cultural critic Suely Rolnik, and the critic, composer and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha. In 2006, Suely Rolnik observes that:

One of the problems of the politics of subjectivation that artistic practices face has been the anesthesia of our vulnerability to the other – an anesthesia all the more devastating when the other is represented by the ruling cartography as hierarchically inferior, because of his or her economic, social or racial condition, or on any other basis.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Rosanna Hertz, *Reflexivity & Voice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), viii

⁴⁹ See Kwon, 2000, 76

⁵⁰ Suely Rolnik, "The Geopolitics of Pimping," 2006, accessed October 12, 2009 <http://transform.ejpcp.net/transversal/1106/rolnik/en#redir>

For Rolnik, vulnerability is the precondition for the other to cease being a simple object for the projection of pre-established images, but rather the condition from which the other becomes a living presence. Without vulnerability, she argues, it is not possible to construct the territories of our existence and the changing configurations of our subjectivity.⁵¹ Trinh also argues that if the making subject is always vulnerably exposed in her making project, the practice will involve much less arrogance, much less ‘it-goes-without-saying’ assumptions and taken-for-granted dominance.⁵² According to Rolnik, however, ‘being vulnerable depends on the activation of a specific capacity of the sensible, which has been repressed for many centuries, remaining active only in certain philosophical and poetic traditions.’ Indeed, vulnerability is not longed for, nor is it intensively practiced. It has been repressed to assume our intelligence. How then to cultivate, even embrace, this vulnerability in one’s practice?

In my practice, the cultivation and embrace starts with recognizing that I am vulnerable on many different levels: from my own embodiment to my place within *lucha libre* and to the privileges I may lack or have as a result of my gender, race, class, ethnicity, age, education and profession. Without a doubt, vulnerability describes the potential to be harmed but simultaneously it has the capacity to transform the relationship in which we work into one that recognizes the importance of human interdependency. Rather than controlling, vulnerability is about connecting. To activate what Rolnik calls this specific capacity of the sensible, I have found that it is important in my practice to allow myself to be ‘stupid’, to be open and willingly embrace my own ignorance, my state of not-knowing. I do not consider being ‘stupid’ as a judgement on myself rather as something that I am also willing to be perceived as. Apart from English, Spanish is my second language and there are moments –especially if colloquialisms are used and/or unknown persons and events are mentioned– when I have no idea what is going on. Moreover, I

⁵¹ Rolnik, 2006

⁵² Minh-ha T. Trinh, *Framer Framed* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 184

understand gestures differently or not at all, and sometimes my body language causes weird reactions. In the last chapter, vulnerability will be taken up in relation to the albur, a widespread form of wordplay through the use of sexual double-entendres, as I feel especially vulnerable in situations that I am addressed with albures. In this sense, the lucha libre arena functions also as a space that allows me to learn the complexities of the culture, to listen *and* practice on different verbal and physical levels.

To recognize this, for me, is to recognise my own vulnerability. I am vulnerable as I may be able to think and feel upside down, to cultivate the paradoxical and the contradictory rather than projecting yet another pre-established image. As much as the philosopher Michel Foucault sought to ‘recuperate stupidity’ as a philosophical strategy, I pursue the activation of vulnerability as an important state in relating to the people that I meet in my practice and throughout the self-reflexive process of research, writing and practice.⁵³ Vulnerability, I propose, is frequently not clearly identifiable but is often linked to a complex interdependence and as such it influences the visions and the changing configurations of my subjectivity. If acknowledged and practiced, vulnerability is a position and state that may allow artists to avoid simple projections, and rather grant the relationships in which we work a living, tender presence.

In the course of my research and involvement with the luchas, the above-mentioned positions of the artist as ethnographer, as anthropologist engaged, as vulnerable observer and as affective participant have overlapped “againsttogether” in many instances. In the arena, I am an affective participant that sometimes inhabits the space between the ring and the audience. At times, often addressed as ‘la güera’ (blond hair, fair skinned one), and equipped with a camera, I am directly addressed by the crowd: “¡Güera, filmame (film me)! ¡Mirame! (Look at me!) ¡Güera, dame la cámara (give me the camera)!”, and at other times I am a less conspicuous member of the

⁵³ Michel Foucault, 1970, “Theatrum Philosophicum”, *Critique* 282 (November 1970): 190

audience.⁵⁴ My position changes in the interview situation. I met most luchadoris first in the press room of their agency. The luchadoris, who consider themselves artists and athletes, and their activity a sport, are aware that lucha libre is also a spectacle and their job is not only to luchar, to win or lose, but also to put on a satisfying show. Giving interviews is part of this. While I concur with Trinh that the necessity for interviews is situated ‘in the *interval* between interviewer and interviewee, in the movement between listening and speaking’, luchadoris are used to giving interviews to the media and so they perform this setting in a particular way.⁵⁵ In this situation, my role is less that of an ethnographer, trying to access some kind of truth or ‘real’ luchadori, but instead becomes more a question of wandering along with the luchadoris’ fictions.

As I go on to explore in Chapter 1, secrecy and masking are a very important element of lucha libre. When I interview the luchadoris, the question of the interviews’ authenticity becomes irrelevant. Heather Levi points out in her ‘insider’s account’ that:

Secrets are kept secret to generate the energy of secrecy. [...] The point is not to keep people ignorant, but to produce an indefinite deferral of revelation, of floating sense of indeterminacy. Lucha libre, ultimately, dramatizes the complex relationship between secrecy and power.⁵⁶

During the process of realizing an intervention in a regular lucha libre program –*El legado transcultural (The Transcultural Legacy, 2011)*–, I realized the important and complex role that secrecy plays in lucha libre. During press interviews, neither the luchadoris, the journalists nor I would mention who would win and who would lose even though we had to know and the reporters were allowed to know it. While we all knew the men and their faces behind the masks we never addressed them by their names. This did not mean,

⁵⁴ Güero/a 1. Blond hair (yellow or gold) II 2. Fair skin (Diccionario breve de Mexicanismos, 2001) Although Güero/a typically refers to a blond person it can mean anyone of lighter skin and hair, even a person with light brown or brown hair. It can also be used to “praise” the person that is addressed because of the ethnic and class hierarchies at place.

⁵⁵ Minh-ha T. Trinh, *Cinema Interval* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 4

⁵⁶ Levi, 2008, 47

however, that we acted as if we did not know: we all knew and we knew each other knew it. We were all part of it as, indeed, ‘secrecy is a structuring feature’⁵⁷. But rather than preserving power, as secrecy operates many times in the political arena, it was meant to extend and keep alive the uncertainty and surprise amongst us. In this dissertation, I propose that secrecy is yet another point that political movements have drawn from *lucha libre*. In this sense they have appeared even more powerful as they exploit secrecy, applying it strategically to share information, heretofore hidden, and thus fight inequality, environmental injustice, discrimination, privatization, animal and workers’ rights.

Throughout this project my positions have been transitional, mobile and “againsttogether”. For example, during the project *El legado transcultural*. I changed from being the artist as script-writer to co-programmer of a *lucha libre* event, from designer of a luchadori’s outfit to the artist as promoter of SUPERDEVOLUCIÓN COPILLI QUETZALLI and of the *lucha* PENACHO VS PENACHO. Each time I tried to acknowledge and practice vulnerability so that I could avoid simple projections, even though that meant to get hurt. Thus, my positions can also be considered under “againsttogether”. As “againsttogether” invokes a combination of oppositions, such as competition and complicity, individuality and collectiveness, it has the potential to exemplify such a condition where one is never quite contained within all the aspects of a project, yet is simulateneously a part of it.

I.IV Creating a Space Full of Force and Vulnerability

As discussed in the section above, secrets need to be kept alive to keep energy in *lucha libre*. Esther Gabara argues that ‘the spectacle of *lucha libre* inspires a broader desire to know the reality that it seems to mask.’⁵⁸ In the first chapter of this dissertation, I set out to problematize her argument that

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Gabara, 2009, 278

there is a desire to unmask lucha libre. The account of reality in lucha libre, according to Gabara, appears to be somewhere else. I disagree with this: in my experience, it is never a question of getting to a reality in the luchas but rather that different realities coincide, intervene and overlap. Novo states that the luchas are the ‘artistic sublimation of a real and objective fact whose essence purges itself of reality.’⁵⁹ The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud defines sublimation as a process in which people are enabled to deal with socially unacceptable impulses, feelings, and ideas. As such, forbidden sexual inclinations, which do not find their expression, are sublimated into socially acceptable activities. Taking up this definition, I suggest that through the luchas’ ‘artistic sublimation’ queer desires could take place in the arena among luchadoris and the audience.⁶⁰ As I will go on to argue, the luchas are not opposed to reality through masking it, they are not somehow against reality. Instead, I consider the complex relations between the luchas, their masks and the performances as another form of vs., as an “againsttogether”. The luchadoris and the audience ‘work [“againsttogether”] with the interface between the different realities’.⁶¹ Nevertheless, I want to clarify that my view is not based on an assumption that the luchas’ discourses are mere reflections of and/or reactions to the reality outside the one of lucha libre. Rather, I argue that there are implicit ambiguities and contradictions in their configurations. I propose that issues invoked in one context can be used to work “againsttogether” with another one, which implies a back and forth of mutual (mis-)interpretations, (mis-)understandings, creative re-readings and re-workings –or purgings– which occur at every level.

Lucha libre, I argue, might only be grasped within the conditions set by this very ambiguity and contradiction. For as much as lucha libre has taken place both in and outside the arenas, and as much as it has taken place through artistic production and appropriation, it defies easy and simple categorization.

⁵⁹ Novo, 1964, 600

Translation from Spanish: ‘[...] la sublimación artística de un hecho real y objetivo cuya esencia se depura de la realidad.’

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 176

It is one of a whole string of forms that are characterized by fluidity and improvisation, intimacy and contact, immediacy and spectacle. In this dissertation, I argue that lucha libre could thus function as a space where an encounter of at least two bodies is presented in all its unknown potentiality. It is in these in-betweens of the luchadoris' and the audiences' bodies that create what I call a space full of force and vulnerability. As such, lucha libre might offer a space for the production of intimacies where one might be transformed by the potentialities that the luchadoris demonstrate. In short, does lucha libre allow a glimpse of utopias already in full effect?

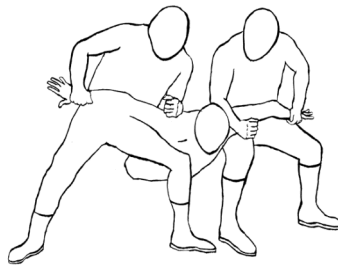


Fig. 2

In *Rabelais and his World*, the philosopher, literary critic and semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin explores the transformative potentialities of cultural practices, rituals and symbols, such as carnival, popular feasts and festivals, designated as the carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, carnivalesque practices allowed an 'atmosphere of freedom, frankness and familiarity' that intended to temporarily suspend hierarchical relationships so that 'all were considered equal'⁶²; to facilitate the release of carnivalesque laughter and to liberate from fear⁶³; and to dissolve the individual self as s/he 'feels that [s/]he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people's mass body.'⁶⁴ As such, the carnival is a practice and enactment –however temporary– of a transformed set of relations, a 'living possibility', which is 'lived by the whole man, in thought and body.'⁶⁵ Bakhtin believed that during these carnivalesque enactments the participants were

⁶² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 195 and 10

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 59-144

In chapter 3 I will take a closer look at the carnivalesque laughter.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 255

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 48

reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind.⁶⁶

In other words, the carnival takes place “againsttogether” the contemporary socio-political contexts: as an ongoing cultural form it is simultaneously opposed and continuous to transform from within.

Even though I do not consider that people participating in the luchas are ‘reborn for new, purely human relations’ yet they are able to experience momentarily an “againsttogether” of the ‘utopian ideal and the realistic’, of what is given and the transformative potentialities beyond this given.⁶⁷ It is this “againsttogether” that I attempt to push forward in this thesis. I argue that these transformative potentialities are apparent not only in what Bakhtin designated the carnivalesque, but also in the luchas, if only for their length. Within the context of this thesis the utopian is understood as transformative potentialities – as ongoing, dynamic, dissident, unpredictable and transformative products of human actions and agencies.

For me, it is also really important to point out that while thinking about, taking pleasures in, reading about, writing and working nearby the luchas, I always find myself in something of a liminal “againsttogether” space –in what I will describe as nepantla– where contradictory and conflictual issues come together and are wrestled over in my body, mind and senses.⁶⁸ The luchadoris construct a body image through a complex set of poses, gestures, llaves, wardrobes, make-up or masks, as well as through their skillful handling of the audience, photography and media attention. These bodies inhabit, perform and handle gender in very particular ways. In this dissertation, I look at the implications of their work for the positioning of viewer and participants and for the debates around gender in Mexico today.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 10

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Nepantla is a Nahuatl word meaning “in-between space.” Anzaldúa used it to develop further her Borderlands theory. See Chapter 3

In order to explore further these questions, chapter 2 takes a closer look at the representations and performances of gender in the ring in order to wrestle with complex, nuanced, ambiguous and contradictory roles, and the moves and agencies that occur there. I will explore how gender is perceived and constructed, how gender is represented in discourse and how these representations of gender are related to power. These notions of power are intrinsically gendered in so far as power –in lucha libre as well as many other contexts– is understood as the prerogative of men. Gender, I argue, is indispensable for grasping the ways in which forms of social inequalities and injustices are conceived. I do not consider, however, gender the sole discourse that subordinates all the others, as the sociologist Avtar Brah so eloquently points out:

For instance, a discourse may be primarily about gender and, as such, it may centre upon gender-based binaries (although, of course, a binarised construction is not always inevitable). But this discourse will not exist in isolation from others, such as those signifying class, “race”, religion or generation. The specificity of each is framed in and through fields of representation of the other.⁶⁹

The relationships between discourses, representations and image productions are not easy to tease out, yet, I consider gender as a significant carrier through which meaning is constructed. In the second chapter I will discuss how gender becomes a way of structuring discourses, how it becomes a mask through which discourses on nationalism, for example, are constructed. From my point of view, certain luchas seem to embody the ability, which the cultural theorist Judith ‘Jack’ Halberstam grants queer genders, to ‘profoundly disturb the order of relations between the [male and the female], the authentic and the inauthentic, the original and the mimic, the real and the constructed.’⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (New York/London: Routledge, 1996), 185

⁷⁰ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (London and New York: New York University Press, 2005), 45

I.V A Queer Reading Strategy

When I watched the luchas for the first time, I did not read them through the frameworks of mexicanidad nor machismo, as is often the case; I read them as queer. As I will explore in the first chapter however, difficulties arise not only through the translation and adaptation of queer theory to my context, but also through a tendency to supplant other terms with “queer,” thus effacing their turbulent history of meaning and appropriation: e.g. terms such as lesbian or gay, or loca or marica amongst others in the context of Mexico and Latin America. The transferability of queer is thus by no means simple or straightforward. Queer and queer theory are ‘historically and culturally specific concepts that were generated and applied in a particular space of experience.’⁷¹ Nevertheless, the power of queer lies particularly in the very range of its use, which has prevented it from becoming a clear and fixed category. But it also resides within its history, a productive strategy of appropriation and partial reinterpretation that takes place in different linguistic and socio-political contexts. In this dissertation, I do not want to make a unidirectional exchange of queer theory nor just to import it. I will rather apply a “differential genealogy”, as suggested by the literary critic José Javier Maristany.

In his text *¿Una teoría queer latinoamericana?: Postestructuralismo y políticas de la identidad en Lemebel* (A queer latinamerican theory? Poststructuralism and identity politics in Lemebel), Maristany reflects on the question of a Latin American theories and practices of queerness. He maps the knowledge flows of queer practice and theory between centre and periphery, the theoretical canon and its margins, and demonstrates a “genealogía diferencial” (“differential genealogy”) for what might be called a queer theory and practice of different authors: specifically Pedro Lemebel and

⁷¹ Sabine Hark, „Queering oder Passing: Queer Theory eine normale Disziplin? Gender Studies. Wissenschaftstheorien und Gesellschaftskritik,” in *Gender Studies: Wissenschaftstheorien und Gesellschaftskritik*, eds. Therese Frey Steffen, Caroline Rosenthal and Anke Väth (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004), 67 Translation from German: „historisch und kulturell konkret in einem bestimmten Erfahrungsraum entstandene und angewandte Begriffe.“

Néstor Perlongher in his text. By “genealogía diferencial” Maristany refers to a reading and an appropriation of queer theory that emerged in the United States in the 90s. Moreover Maristany emphasises the problem of translation, bounded both in terms of textuality and of cultural dimension, and he asks these important questions: ‘Would we practice a type of violence attempting to read within [the] matrix [of intelligibility]? Does this mean we should postulate a spotless criticism, free of any type of contaminating foreign speculation?’⁷²

These questions are not only relevant directly to this thesis but also to my own position within this project. I am in a constant process of translation, not only from one language into another as discussed, but into writing, into different medias and contexts. Translation is used here both literally and metaphorically for “working difference”, re-creating and generating meanings. During this process I have realized that my translations are not innocent.⁷³ My works are creations that are inherently the products of a subjective and interpretative space that echoes Ted T. Aoki’s notion of the impossibility of ‘absolute translation [as it] is ever incomplete and partial’.⁷⁴ In this sense, I use translation and openings to the non-translatable as a metaphor for rethinking connection and difference. Translation asks us to ‘complicate the notion of belonging: one has to belong and not belong’.⁷⁵

A queer reading strategy forces instability and transition to challenge the assumptions that have shaped the study of *lucha libre*. As queerness has the potential to complicate ways of seeing gender and sexuality as well as race, ethnicity, class, time and space, I place particular emphasis upon *lucha libre*’s relationship to a queer reading strategy. I strive to link issues related to the

⁷² Maristany, 2008, 17

Translation from Spanish: ‘¿Estaríamos ejerciendo algún tipo de violencia al intentar una lectura con esa matriz? ¿Se trata tal vez de postular una crítica impoluta y no contaminada por ningún tipo de especulación foránea?’ Queer theory as “*matriz de inteligibilidad*” (“matrix of intelligibility”), to use a concept that is conspicuous to certain cultural practices in Latin America.

Some Spanish translations of the very term “queer”: For example the *teoría torcida* (“twisted theory,” as in the title of Ricardo Llamas’s 1998 book); or *teoría marica* (“sissy theory,” as in a review 1999 of several English-language books by Julio Seoane Pinilli), or *teoría maricona*, *teoría bollera*, *teoría maribollo*

⁷³ Susan Bassnet and Harish Trivedi, *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice (Translation Studies)*, (New York: Routledge, 1999)

⁷⁴ Ted T. Aoki, *Curriculum in a new key: the collected works of Ted. T. Aoki*, eds. William F. Pinar, and Rita L. Mahwah Irwin (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers, 2005), 430

⁷⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Intimate revolt*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 131

social construction of gender in its plural manifestations, encompassing heterosexual, homosexual, queer and becoming desires and practices. I identify the rich prequeer legacy in lucha libre, the popular fichera film subgenre of the 1970s and '80s and the albur, focusing on the multiple and often conflicting readings made possible by adopting queer theory and reading practices, and interrogate the different ways in which popular cultures can be intercultural and go beyond accepted notions of what it means to be a woman, Mexican, macho, gay etc.⁷⁶



Fig. 3

Throughout the thesis I stress the importance of the audience's participation in making the luchas possible in the first place. Generally, I consider that the luchadoris embody certain performative acts but also that the performance of the audience is as relevant as the one in the ring. Can this performative participation take place within a queer reading strategy? The luchas not only minimize the distance between performers and spectators, constituting both as participants, they also occupy a liminal, suspended, cross boundary zone, where spectators become performers, using gestural and/or verbal acts among themselves and directed to the luchadoris.

A queer reading strategy, hopefully, also brings something challenging to the process of reading to provoke a reconsideration of the identity of the reader and the audience. Central to my proposal is the acknowledgement that a queer reading strategy involves a rethinking of my ability to relate – to position myself vulnerably. At the end of his text, Maristany invites further research around what he has called “genealogía diferencial” to pose the initial problem differently:

⁷⁶ Thanks to Rodrigo Parrini for pointing out the possibility of a prequeer reading.

[W]e may no longer necessarily be thinking in a Latin American version of queerness as a translation or a vacuum to be filled, instead as a device or method of mapping the politics of representation of minorities in the north and south, so they could connect and/or deviate from each other, in agreement[,] in differences⁷⁷

and/or as “againsttogether”?

Consequently through exploring queerness in the luchas, I want to discuss those complex circumstances that resist simple and easy categorization. Queer becomes a necessary framework that allows me to grasp the luchas’ conditions set by its very own ambiguity and contradiction. I will take a closer look at Anzaldúa’s engagement with and reworking of myths as a means to interrogate the myths’ ideologies and assumptions as well as her concept of nepantla – an in-between space. I will question if lucha libre can be positioned “againsttogether” the borders of heteronormativity, where, among others, the myths of mexicanidad and machismo can be found. As categories of being and appearance, repetition and imitation, masking and masquerade play an important role in the construction and negotiation of genders, I will examine Butler’s theory of repetition and her analysis of masquerade. Through dwelling on the kiss in the final chapter, I will reflect upon Muñoz’ proposal of gesture as a utopian and a transient trace of queer histories.



Fig. 4

⁷⁷ Maristany, 2008, 24

Translation from Spanish: ‘nos permitiría plantear la problemática inicial de manera diferente pues no se trataría ya de pensar necesariamente en la versión latinoamericana de lo *queer* como una traducción o un vacío a llenar, sino de cartografiar modalidades de concebir las políticas de representación de las minorías, al norte y al sur, de modo que pudieran conectarse y/o desviarse’.

As stated above, my reading and questioning here does not intend to unravel the meaning of the luchas. Rather, I attempt to set them in motion. I structure this text like a lucha programme with three lucha matches in two or three caídas (falls). Within these luchas, I intend not to straighten out differences between various figures, aspects and ideas, but instead to leave space for these often desired contradictions to play themselves out. Each chapter prioritizes a layering within and of lucha libre, whilst also articulating the intricate local and transnational configurations that occur. Therefore, each lucha with its two or three caídas are webbed, multilayered and overlapping.

In Chapter One, I will discuss several masks that are applied to talk about Mexico and thus to mask differences through concepts such as mexicanidad, mestizaje and indigenismo of an imaginary, unified, national community. Through explaining the deployment of the mask in Mesoamerica, and why it matters in the luchas, I will also take a closer look at the mask as a means to explore discourses of nationalism and secrecy. I attempt to question if the deployment of masks may open up other possibilities for critiquing and transgressing racial, ethnic and gender norms.

In Chapter Two, I will take a closer look at the concept of machismo, and the figures of La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe, the construction of gender and power with particular emphasis on the way gender is articulated and the meaning it seems to convey with respect to power. While exploring the luchadoris' roles in the arena, I will question notions such as repetition, imitation, masking and masquerade. Attempting to link los luchadoris exóticos with la loca (effeminate homosexuals) I will examine their representations in the ring and in the fichera film subgenre. I set out to see if the exóticos in the ring favour representations and practices that resist being pinned down to a single meaning, granting rather gender ambiguity space and time.

In Chapter Three, I will take a closer look at the spaces – the arena and the changing rooms that facilitate the luchas, relating them to nepantla and queer

time and space. I go on to explore different modes of participation, such as sport, albur, gesture and kisses. At the centre of the luchas is the audience's participation, giving way to a unique complicity in the arena, where these gestures where the beso (kiss) can be found. I will question if potential utopias could emerge from such gestural practices, and if these could offer ephemeral traces of queer histories.

1. CHAPTER 1: LA PRIMERA (THE FIRST) LUCHA Play of Masks

The basic framework for lucha libre as it exists today came about through the founding of the private *Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre* (Worldwide Wrestling Council - CMLL).¹ On September 21, 1933, lucha libre had its debut in the Arena Modelo in Mexico City.² The promoter Salvador Lutteroth and his partner Francisco Ahumada first brought in wrestlers from Texas, and later on from Germany, Poland, Italy, and beyond, to promote lucha libre as a battle between wrestlers from different nations.³ Consequently, we can see that lucha libre has always been transnational from its inception. Significantly, we can also see that it was considered a transnational sport and was not directly part of the state-funded, post-Revolutionary cultural projects. Yet lucha libre began in the context of the post-revolutionary period, when the modern relationship between cultura popular (popular culture) and mexicanidad was born.⁴

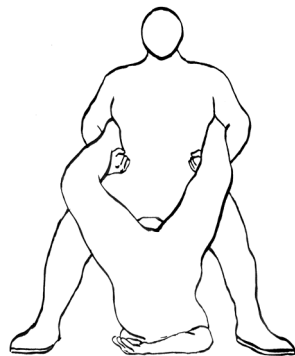


Fig. 5

From the start of the twentieth century, and in particular after the Mexican Revolution, the concepts of mexicanidad, mestizaje and indigenismo emerged

¹ back then the *Empresa Mexicana de la Lucha Libre* (Mexican Wrestling Enterprise – EMLL)

Lucha libre is organised by *empresas*, private enterprises consisting of at least one promoter and a stable of luchadoris. The biggest competition to CMLL <http://www.cml.com/> is Triple A <http://www.luchalibreaaa.com/> that was founded in 1992 and is owned by Televisa.

² By 1953, as even Arena Coliseo was too small for the crowds attending the luchas, Lutteroth constructed on the site of Arena Modelo Arena México as it was renamed and completed in 1956.

³ For example the luchador rudo El Lobo Letonia, Wolf Ruvinskis (1921-1999), a Latvian Jew, who wrestled from the 1940s to the 1950s and appeared as Neutrón in several luchadores movies (1960-1964).

⁴ Within the Mexican context the term cultura popular has come to mean something different than, for example, in the context of the United States or Great Britain, where it usually refers to television, rock music and other products of the “culture industry”. In Mexico, however, the culturas populares are the cultures of the subaltern classes. By contrast to inauthentic and/or hegemonic mass (-mediated) culture they may be imagined as a site of authenticity and resistance.

and were strongly debated by intellectual, political and artistic groups. These are terms and discourses that I have encountered again and again, to a greater and lesser degree, as I have attempted to educate myself about the context of *lucha libre* and the historical, political, social and cultural background of the country that is becoming my home. On the one hand, these concepts confronted me with my very partial and fragmented knowledge –a mix of Carlos Fuente’s novels, Frida Kahlo’s art, life and writings, the Zapatista movement, the world famous films by Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Carlos Reyadas, the ongoing controversy about the *penacho* (feather headdress) between Austria and Mexico, combined with a strong dose of news on violence and femicides– in short, with my ignorance. On the other hand, I have generally found that these concepts operate as absolute, homogenizing and fixed framings of what I have perceived as more complex and contradictory. In contemporary Mexico as elsewhere, there are as many competing political discourses as there are competing moral discourses, grounded in a variety of different views. For a while, I felt compelled to abandon these concepts within my writing as I did not want to perpetuate them and because I did not encounter them in my conversations with the *luchadoris*. Yet, in 2005, before the publication of her book *Lourdes Grobet: Al filo del ojo*, which compiles more than 35 years of work, Grobet stated in an interview: ‘[T]here couldn’t be anything more Mexican than *lucha libre*’.⁵ Moreover, many people to whom I spoke, after their experiences with *lucha libre*, consider it as well something particularly Mexican. How could it be possible to think about *lucha libre* as completely Mexican without the terms *mexicanidad*, *mestizaje* and *indigenismo*? Might it be then that ‘Mexican’ in itself is more complex and hybrid? Does *lucha libre* simply manifest a notion of *mexicanidad* or does it intervene in hegemonic articulations of that national identity?

The concepts of *mexicanidad*, *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* have historically

⁵ cited in Miguel Angel Ceballos, “Cultura popular protagoniza ‘Al filo del ojo’,” 2005, accessed August 01, 2011 http://www2.eluniversal.com.mx/pls/impreso/noticia.html?id_notas=42206&tabla=cultura.

Translation from Spanish:

[...] no podía existir algo más mexicano que la *lucha libre* [...]

provided a means of defining an independent Mexico against its colonial past directing its efforts toward incorporating indigenous society. Yet, in a large and populous country marked by ethnic, regional and class divisions, these discourses also seek to homogenize and fix –to mask– what is actually heterogeneous and mobile. I am not interested therefore in re-inscribing these terms, but rather aim to discuss them as a play of masks that are applied to talk about Mexico: masks which often conceal the real differences and power relations that exist in this imaginary, unified, national community.



Fig. 6

In *La Jaula de la Melancolía* (The Cage of Melancholy) the anthropologist-sociologist Roger Bartra evokes various mythical images as he considers the Mexican Revolution itself, the peasant hero, el mestizo and la chingada (the fucked one) amongst others.⁶ Among these, he critically reflects on what constitutes mexicanidad. In doing so, he does not simply question it as literal and mythological phenomena but as a way to discuss how mexicanidad

becomes part of the cultural and social structure of Mexico. He analyzes these myths because:

I believe that I have found a weak point or a crack in the national phenomena[.] [...] This weak point is formed, curiously, by the very studies of the nature of the Mexican national character (and especially studies of “Mexican-ness”). I am interested in these studies because their object of analysis (the so-called “national character”) is an imaginary construction that they themselves have invented, with the decisive aid of literature, art and music. In reality, the essays on “Mexican-ness” bite themselves on the tail, so to speak: they are an ideological and cultural emanation of the phenomenon they pretend to study [...]⁷

⁶ The term chingada is derived from the verb chingar, which, although it has various meanings, denotes above all violence, a penetration of another by force. I'll discuss la chingada in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Roger Bartra, *La Jaula de la Melancolía*, 1st ed. (México D.F.: Editorial Grijalbo, 1987)

⁷ Bartra, 1987, 15-16

Translation from Spanish:

'[...] me parece haber encontrado un punto débil, una resquebrajadura [...] Este punto débil está formado, curiosamente, por los mismos estudios sobre la configuración del carácter nacional mexicano (y especialmente, las reflexiones sobre “lo mexicano”). Me interesan dichos estudios porque su objeto de reflexión (el llamado “carácter nacional”) es una construcción imaginaria que ellos mismos han elaborado, con la ayuda decisiva de la literatura, el arte y la música. En realidad, los ensayos sobre “lo mexicano” se muerden la cola, por así decirlo: son una emanación ideológica y cultural del mismo fenómeno que pretendo estudiar [...]

These myths are produced by the hegemonic culture, which ‘end up constituting a sort of meta-discourse [...] to which many [...] return in order to explain the national identity.’⁸ For Bartra, these myths are not false, neither reality nor a lie. They are a mimesis, an imitation that corresponds to the structures of power. Concurring with Bartra, rather than simply being a description of reality, my research project and art works also operate in these realms of mythology. However, as much as Bartra considers it important to analyze myths, Anzaldúa, who rewrote myths against the oppressors, states that ‘myths and fictions create reality’⁹: ‘I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become.’¹⁰ Hence, the framings and images of *lucha libre* that I evoke are not considered to be a factual record, but neither are myths and fictions considered impotent. These images and framings take me, however, to several questions about what is, I believe, at stake in and outside the ring. I see that *mexicanidad*, *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* –the construction of a nation state and its race politics– have been important in the legitimizing process of the modern Mexican state. This legitimizing process however excludes and stratifies. As Anzaldúa points out: ‘[T]hese myths and fictions are used against women and against certain races to control, regulate and manipulate’.¹¹ In this sense, *mexicanidad*, *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* correspond with the national structures of power and they help to understand the mechanisms for the production and reproduction of power there. It is impossible therefore, to ignore terms and what they construct. They operate powerfully in the context of *lucha libre* and traces of these discourses can also be found within *lucha libre*. Therefore, I have decided to include these terms here, as I seek to complicate and question them.¹² For as much as *lucha libre*

⁸ Ibid, 16

Translation from Spanish:

‘[...] terminan por constituir una especie de metadiscurso: [...] a los que acuden muchos [...] para explicar la identidad nacional.’

⁹ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Interviews / Entrevistas / Gloria Anzaldúa*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 219

¹⁰ Anzaldúa, 2007, 93

¹¹ Anzaldúa, 2000, 219

¹² The most straightforward relationship between *lucha libre* and *mexicanidad* (and *machismo*) established Susana Vargas Cervantes (2010, 201) in her article *Performing mexicanidad: Criminality and lucha libre* in which she states: ‘*Lucha libre*, through its multiple performative dimensions, contributes to the production of *mexicanidad* as a pervasive ideology in which the figure of the ideal Mexican is that of (a heterosexual) *mestizo* and *macho*. Wrestlers perform the original myth of the *mestizo* nation through the enactment of *machismo*, reiterating authenticity through melodramatic combat.’

embodies these discourses it also contradicts them as we will see in the following sections. Through looking at the use of the mask itself in lucha libre, I will discuss mexicanidad, mestizaje and indigenismo.

1.1 Section 1: LA PRIMERA CAÍDA – THE FIRST FALL Wrestling over Mexicanidad Vs. Mestizaje Vs. Indigenismo



Fig. 7

In the twentieth century, no other state in the western hemisphere invested as much in the creation and promotion of a national culture as the Mexican government. An investment that began in education, the arts, music, archaeology and museums in 1921, expanded to radio, film, comic books, newspapers, traffic infrastructure and tourism in the 1930s and by the 1950s embraced dance and television.¹³ ‘For most of [the twentieth] century the concept of mexicanidad’, writes film critic Charles Ramírez Berg, ‘has been the key concept in Mexican intellectual, political and artistic thought.’¹⁴ The emergent state after the Mexican Revolution (1910-20) focused especially on a cultural policy that celebrated the nation’s regional and ethnic diversity while simultaneously attempting to unite and homogenize the population under a single, centrally derived, concept – mexicanidad. Mexicanidad originated as an anti-colonial position, as both a line of defence and a process of collective self-discovery, over time growing in strength to be what the philosopher and anthropologist Jesús Martín Barbero summarizes as ‘a popular revolution against creoles, private corporations, and foreign threats.’¹⁵ In the construction of mexicanidad the concept of mestizaje, however also played a relevant factor.

Mestizaje is a concept without a direct English-language equivalent. It is a

¹³ Mary, Kay Vaughan, “Transnational Processes and the Rise and Fall of the Mexican Cultural State: Notes from the Past,” in *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico since 1940*, eds. Gilbert M. Joseph, Anne Rubenstein and Eric Zolov (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 471.

¹⁴ Charles Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude: A Critical Study of Mexican Film 1967-1983* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 2

¹⁵ Jesús Martín-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to the Mediations* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993), 136

term in flux whose definition varies depending on the time and context. The *Diccionario de la lengua español* defines mestizaje as (1) crossing of different races, (2) set of individuals that result from this crossing, (3) mixture of different cultures, giving rise to a new one.¹⁶ In her book *Sugar Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism*, Vera M. Kutzinski specifies mestizaje as a product of cultural syncretism and colonial representation:

Mestizaje can variably be translated as miscegenation, racial amalgamation (as in blanqueamiento, whitening), creolization, racial mixing, inter- or transculturation. It is perhaps best described as a peculiar form of multiculturalism – one that has circulated in the Caribbean and in Hispanic America, most notoriously in Brazil, as series of discursive formations tied to nationalist interests and ideologies.¹⁷

Furthermore, Kutzinski reflects on the need to understand mestizaje as a product of a history formed by cultural encounters, differences and the “whitening” of the indigenous/black colonial subject. Beginning in the late twentieth century, mestizaje has become a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to allocate hybrid sites of experience, empowerment and agency.¹⁸ The literary critic Amaryll B. Chanady, however, states that contemporary discussions of mestizaje need to be situated within ‘the tradition of national self-definition, self-affirmation, and racial justice,’ which resumes the ideals developed in Latin America during the period of national consolidation in the nineteenth century as result of the movements of independence against the Spanish colonial power.¹⁹

In post-revolutionary Mexico, for intellectuals such as Justo Sierra, who were instrumental in its formation, mestizaje provided thus a means of defining an

¹⁶ “Diccionario de la lengua español, ”mestizaje”, accessed June 19, 2011, http://buscon.rae.es/draeI/SrvltConsulta?TIPO_BUS=3&LEMA=mestizaje.

Translation from Spanish: ‘1. Cruzamiento de razas diferentes. 2. Conjunto de individuos que resultan de este cruzamiento. 3. Mezcla de culturas distintas, que da origen a una nueva.’

¹⁷ Vera M. Kutzinski, *Sugar Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 4-5

¹⁸ This development is influenced vastly by Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* that was published in 1987.

¹⁹ Amaryll Chanady, “Identity, Politics and *mestizaje*”, in *Contemporary Latin American Studies*, ed. Stephen Hart and Richard Young (London: Arnold, 2003), 201

independent Mexico against its colonial past. Advocates of what José Vasconcelos would later name *la raza cósmica* (the cosmic race) certainly viewed their project as progressive and egalitarian by contrast to the racially stratified society of New Spain.²⁰ Vasconcelos went on to rewrite the European understanding of race and heredity in the early twentieth century. In 1925, he saw the mestizo as one who represented the inception of a “cosmic race” in which all races are blended, leading not to degeneration but instead to the evolution of a new national identity.²¹ From the same time on, the post-revolutionary government, of which Vasconcelos was part, as Minister of Education (1921-24), sustained the project of *mestizaje* through its policies and directed its efforts toward incorporating indigenous society into a mestizo nation self-defined as universal.²²



Fig. 8

In the period started after the revolution, Mexico experienced a realignment and redefinition of the relationship between dominant and subordinate groups, between classes, races and genders: an attempt was made to repressively incorporate previously marginalized groups into the imagined community of the nation.²³ Since Manuel Gamino, Mexican anthropology had been charged

²⁰ Justo Sierra (1848 - 1913) was a writer, historian, politician, educator and founder of the Universidad Nacional (National University) in 1910, currently Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM).

José Vasconcelos Calderón (1882 – 1959) was a writer, lawyer, educator, philosopher and politician. He was one of the most influential and controversial personalities in the development of Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century. For example, he was founder and editor of the magazine “Timón” (1940) that published pro-nazi articles.

²¹ In her comparative study (1991) of eugenic movements in Latin America Nancy Stepan reads Vasconcelos’s work as both an inversion of European and North American racist ideas of white supremacy and as a statement of unity and nation-building at this time. See Nancy Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics”: Race, Gender and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991)

²² Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, 1996, *Mexico Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 170

To this end, rural education programs were instituted in the 1920s, President Lázaro Cárdenas (1895-1970), whose administration run from 1934 to 1940, created the Departamento Autónomo de Asuntos Indígenas (DAAI - Autonomous Department of Indian Affairs) in 1936, and in 1948 the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI - National Indigenist Institute) was founded, which was replaced in 2003 by the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI - National Commission for the Development of the Indigenous).

²³ The concept of the nation as imagined community refers to the one coined by Benedict Anderson, which states that a nation is a community socially constructed, which is to say imagined by the people who perceive themselves as

with the task in bringing the indio (Indian) into this imagined community.²⁴ The artist, critic and writer Mariana Botey points out that Mexican anthropology:

[...] has played a central role in the ideological construction of the Nation State arguably to such an extent that the specific form of discourse that it has generated – Mexican Indigenismo – has not had the Indian as object of study, but the nation itself as its true and essential object.²⁵

Indigenismo, as the study and celebration of indigenous cultures, is a discourse that is related to and often overlapping with the discourse of mexicanidad. As Botey mentions, it is a study that tells very little or nothing about the indigenous people but it tells us much about the framings, readings, needs, fantasies, agendas, agencies and desires by those studying and incorporating the indigenous (anthropologists, bureaucrats, policy makers, poets, novelists, artists, architects and filmmakers) into ‘an imaginary construction that they themselves have invented.’²⁶



Fig. 9

It is important to point out here that it could also be argued that my writing on/about/nearby lucha libre tells as much about my agenda, agency, needs, fantasies and desires as about lucha libre itself. I put myself into the words. I write to risk the personal and as such to make room for vulnerability. Rather than mask my agenda or my tastes and affections for this or that luchadori,

part of that group. See *Imagined Communities* (1983).

²⁴ Manuel Gamino (1883 – 1960) was a Mexican anthropologist, archaeologist, sociologist and a leader of the indigenismo movement.

²⁵ Mariana Botey, “The enigma of Ichcateopan: The Messianic Archive of the Nation” in *Frozen Tears III. Gay prophesy of the demonically social*, ed. John Russel, (Birmingham: ARTicle Press, 2005), 313

²⁶ Bartra, 1996, 15

Translation from Spanish:

[...] una construcción imaginaria que ellos mismos han elaborado [...]

image, film, song, writer, critic, or artist, I use theory and artistic practices to incorporate the personal and make connections among seemingly divergent perspectives. In this process I highlight the questions that luchas pose. Thus in this text I let the mask of what I have learned, know, and feel, slip down to reveal its own instability, my vulnerability.



Fig. 10

Guillermo Bonfil Batalla was one of the most important representatives of a new generation of Mexican anthropologists who began to dominate the academic panorama after 1968. This generation, alongside intellectual and cultural elites, was characterized by its strong criticism of the state's official indigenismo, which is understood as the set of state policies, institutions and laws in relation to indigenous people.²⁷ Bonfil Batalla thus assails this official representation of Mexico as a mestizo nation, with its inherent controlling mechanisms towards indigenous people, calling it *México imaginario* (imaginary Mexico). He argues rather that two worldviews and civilizational projects simply coexist, though they interpenetrate. Instead of a true transformation in culture, what has occurred, he claims, is only a transformation in ideology. The official government's ideology promotes images of racial and cultural mixture and integration, but in reality the westernization plan has only been superimposed upon a Mesoamerican indigenous base which still underlies most of Mexico, what he calls *México profundo* (deep Mexico). Bonfil Batalla does not question this dichotomy and

²⁷ Bonfil, 2004

Arturo Warman, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, Margarita Nolasco Santiago, Mercedes Olvera de Vázquez and Enrique Valencia attacked the dominant strain of indigenismo in the manifesto *De eso que llaman antropología mexicana* (Of That Which Is Called Mexican Anthropology, 1969) that consisted of five individually authored texts to contest the convictions that has justified their discipline in the decades since the Revolution. The manifesto makes the claim that the discipline's role is a corrupt one: that of handing over the Indian to the authoritarian state for exploitation and co-optation.

his thesis of México imaginario is one of a colonizing project, which makes of the country's indigenous population a *civilización negada* (denied civilization). This *civilización negada* has resurged e.g. after the 1992 quinquennial commemorations of the so-called discovery of America as well as the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation EZLN)'s profound rejection of the México imaginario through its actions since 1994. Bonfil Batalla suggested that Mexico needs to face not outwards but inwards, towards its indigenous roots as the anthropological discourse had effected. As we have seen and Botey argues:

A displacement of the "other" Indian, to the "Other" European/mesti[z]o [...]. It is, in other words, a double alterity where the exotic other embodies the fantasy of what is the *Real* and necessary in history: an acute and symptomatic manifestation that unfolds as a paradoxical transference of the indigenous alterity at the centre of the nation's symbolic universe.²⁸

In the quote above, Botey uses concepts and categories of psychoanalytic theory to make a reading of the problem of national identity. Applying the Real in a Lacanian sense, she points out that the Indian, as a projection of the not-Indian, is rooted in the imaginary and the symbolic that are inextricably intertwined and work in tension with the Real. Botey's claim is that at the centre of the nation's symbolic universe is a manifestation that unfolds as a paradoxical transference of the indigenous alterity. It is an embodied fantasy. I wonder if, in the centre of the ring, luchadoris might also have served to embody this fantasy? Do the luchadoris allow a witnessing of an "againsttogether" of 'what might be the Real and necessary in history' and in the present?²⁹ Or do they rather serve as yet another displacement of another "Other"?

In the following section, I will examine the luchadoris' characters that face off in the ring. Do the majority refer directly to a 'Mexican identity'? Do they point

²⁸ Botey, 2005, 313

²⁹ Ibid.

out the inherently hybrid, México profundo? Or are they already international? Can characters be found that do not correspond to either of these categories? Through taking a closer look at what role the distinction of the competitors – commonly in teams of three luchadoris– as either rudis or as técnicos play in the construction of lucha libre, I will argue that the rudis and técnicos complicate their characters incorporating an “againsttogether”.

1.1.1 A Variety of Character Categories in Lucha Libre



Fig. 11

Lourdes Grobet’s photography (Fig. 12) from 2009 depicts the luchador Sangre Azteca, who was born 1975 in Mexico City and had his debut 1997, with his family in their living room. He is in the centre of the image right behind his son. His eyes are covered by his mask; thus I can only see those of his wife, daughter and son, who return my look with a friendly smile. The son’s smile is playful, like he is aware of and enjoys this staged moment in front of the camera. Behind them, on the wall, I can see a collection of paraphernalia from Japan – a poster of a Samurai fighter right next to the vitrine and a drawing of a geisha that is cut by the frame of the photo among several lamps, umbrellas, caps and fans. Sangre Azteca made his Japanese debut in 1999 and since then he has been back to the island several times. The family is sitting around a table that covers almost one third of the image, on top of which lies a fabric showing La Piedra del Sol (The Sun Stone with inscriptions alluding to Mexica’s cosmology and solar cults) framed by pyramids and what

seems to be a Mexica god as depicted in the codices. Because Sangre Azteca generally enters the arena enveloped by the same fabric, I expect it was unfolded particularly for the shoot. I am struck by the photo's obvious staging. Moreover, as some luchadoris take on Asian characters in Mexico, I wonder if there is any difference between the paraphernalia from Japan and the one that Sangre Azteca uses in the ring?



Fig. 12

As Mexico, Japan and the United States are the three centres of wrestling, the majority of foreign wrestlers come either from Japan or the United States and wrestlers from each country often tour the others. There are, however, wrestlers from the Caribbean, Central and South America (especially Brazil), Europe (mainly from England, Italy and Spain), and Canada. Some luchadoris take on identities as European or Middle Eastern, among others. They either indicate their “nationalities” through their names and/or their costumes.³⁰ As they do not speak with accents nor do they act stereotypically, their alienness, I argue, plays little role in their luchas. The taken-on-Asian luchadores are marked by their costumes, which are either modelled after martial arts uniforms or after a combination of Samurai’s clothing and Japanese animation. Most of them modify their technique, incorporating kicks and stances from Asian martial art into their movements.³¹ Other identities, however, allude to American Indians such as Apache, Sioux or Mohicans.³² In lucha libre, difference is marked through the name, the costumes and/or techniques that once referred exclusively to specific national cultures and histories.

Sangre Azteca belongs to the tradition of luchadoris who draw on pre-hispanic

³⁰ For example the luchadoris Jennifer Blake, Marco Corleone, Jack Evans, Strong Man, Vampiro Canadiense among others.

³¹ For example the luchadores Dragones Chinos, I, II, Guerrero Samura I, II, Katu Kung Lee, Katu Kung Lee Jr., Octagón, Otagoncito, Oriental I, II, Pentagoncito, Pentagón Black, Yakuza among others.

³² For example the luchadoris Gran Apache I, II, Faby Apache, Mari Apache, Lady Apache, India Sioux I, II, La Mhicana, Mhicano I, II, II among others.

Mexica or Mayan sources and as such, affirm ‘national culture’.³³ It thus seems much more probable that luchadoris turn to pre-hispanic sources such as archeological sites, archeological/art objects and codices, the latter two being made both before and after the conquest, than to be announced as nahua, tarahumara, tzotzil, zapoteco amongst others.³⁴ Notwithstanding this, it is important to note that in lucha libre the complex “ethnological” character category is quite a small one and is embedded in a varied range of characters that are applied. The biggest one is indeed the “animals” category. However, the luchas are not only composed of different luchadoris and character categories but they are, importantly, constituted through the distinction of the competitors –commonly in teams of three luchadoris– introduced as rudis or as técnicos.



Fig. 13

1.1.2 Rudis Vs. the ‘Urban Indians’ as Audience Vs. Técnicos

Each team of rudis or técnicos has their own group of supporters, of which their core groups are frequently placed in front of each other in the arena. However, their competition cannot just be read as a battle between good and evil. Rudo/a has a range of meanings as the dictionary definition shows: crude, without polish, rude, tough, those who do not conform to the rules of art those who have great difficulty in learning or understanding what s/he studies; rigorous, violent, impetuous.³⁵ Within the luchas the main connotation of rudis

³³ For example the luchadoris Angel Azteca I and II, Amenaza Azteca, Cachorro Azteca, Canek, El Mexicano, Guerrero Azteca, Guerrero Tolteca, Indio Cacama, Náhuatl, Princesa Maya, Príncipe Maya, Reyna Azteca etc.

³⁴ The luchadores Charro Aguayo, El Charro, El Jalisco I, II, Rayo de Jalisco I, II among others.

Charro is a term referring to traditional horsemen, originating in the central-western regions of Mexico, primarily in the state of Jalisco. The "charro films" from the Golden Age of Mexican cinema (1935 -1959) probably played a large role in popularizing the charro. The most notable charro stars were Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, Vicente Fernandez among others.

³⁵ THE FREE DICTIONARY, “rudo”, accessed April 10, 2010, <http://es.thefreedictionary.com/>.

Translation from Spanish: Tosco, sin pulimento. Descortés, grosero. Que no se ajusta a las reglas del arte. Que tiene

is crudeness. However, they also display qualities commonly regarded as immoral: sadism, underhandedness, cowardice, appealing to the referee and attempting to abet members of the opposing team to break the rules. The dictionary definition of técnico reads as following: ‘related to the applications of science and the arts, belonging to the language of an art, science or trade, knowledgeable person in a particular art, science or trade’.³⁶ The técnicos use skill to win and conform to their own moral standard by insistently using legal wrestling moves – reserving illegal tactics only for those times when they are unreasonably provoked.



Fig. 14

In the course of their careers, luchadoris change from being a rudi to a técnico and vice versa. There is an ambivalence in the two roles which leads to a position of ‘guttural and visceral passion for the rud[i]s and dubious admiration for the [técnicos].³⁷ The commentators and the audience will debate the advantages and disadvantages of being a técnico or a rudi. The latter, they say, brings sabor (spice) as they fight from passion. On an explicit level, the difference is that the rudis ‘break [the] supposed rules in order to [win], taking what the audience should consider an unfair advantage’ and the técnicos ‘follow what are supposed to be, and what are perceived by the audience, as the rules’.³⁸ In the ring, the rudis and técnicos define each other as their full potentials can only develop “againsttogether” the other. When they

dificultad grande para aprender o percibir lo que estudia. Riguroso, violento, impetuoso.

³⁶ THE FREE DICTIONARY, “técnico”, accessed April 10, 2010, <http://es.thefreedictionary.com/>.

Translation from Spanish: Relativo a las aplicaciones de las ciencias y las artes. Propio del lenguaje de un arte, ciencia u oficio. *m. f.* Persona que está versada en un arte, ciencia u oficio.

³⁷ Carlos Monsiváis, *Los rituales del caos* (Mexico: Biblioteca Era, 1995), 126

³⁸ Birrell and Turowetz, 1979, 225

face each other, apply holds and high flying moves, there are at least two bodies in movement which vibrate and wrestle. They are moving towards each other, apart, down, up, and in between: it is never clear who wins and who loses.

As some areas of the arena are reserved for the rudis' and others for the técnicos' supporters, the luchadoris rudis and técnicos have different orientation of their bodies in the space. Generally the técnicos engage their sympathies with the audience, to thus forge a bond between them. Even if provoked, a técnico cannot respond to the audience with hostility. The rudis can and do: their role is to anger the audience, who often scream albuces back to the luchadoris.³⁹ Grobet describes the lucha libre's audience and luchadoris as 'urban Indians'.⁴⁰ She explains further:

I had promised myself not to take pictures of indigenous peoples or with a folkloric bent, but when I started portraying luchadores I realized that they are the Indian projected on to the city, I found that deep Mexico that I am interested in.⁴¹

With looking for the deep Mexico, Grobet affiliates her interests clearly to Bonfil Batalla's suggestion to face inwards, towards Mexico's indigenous roots. However, I think, with the 'urban Indians' that she found in the luchas, the focus rather lies on transition: as the urban environment influences indigenous migrants from rural communities so too the presence of indigenous peoples transforms their new context as they take hold of the urban. But what does all this mean in a context of the ambivalent position towards the indigenous, as pointed out above? Botey considers that:

A re-translation of another "Other" has taken place: the Indian as rooted in the symbolic/imaginary, a phantasmatic projection of the Mexicans that are not-Indian, the site or structure of the fantasy of

³⁹ A widespread form of worldplays through the use of sexual double-entendres. See Chapter Three.

⁴⁰ cited in Gabara, 2010, 284

⁴¹ cited in Angélica Abelleira, *Una vida sin máscaras. Entrevista con Lourdes Grobet*, 2005, accessed August 1 2011, http://www.lourdesgrobet.com/lourdes_grobet_entrevista_es.htm.

Translation from Spanish: 'Yo me había prometido no hacer fotos de indios ni con sesgo folclórico, pero cuando empecé a retratar luchadores me di cuenta que ellos son el indio proyectado en la ciudad; encontré ese México profundo que me interesa.'

origins and race.⁴²

Hence, if I carry on this line of thought, I ask: do ‘urban Indians’ wrestle over the conception of the “Other,” or their own manifestation of it, in order to bring the ‘internal hidden signifier’⁴³ into the light of the arena? In the following section, through examining the role which the mask –that has been used by the majority of the luchadoris since the 1940s– plays within this ‘re-translation’⁴⁴, I will argue that the mask rather complicates than facilitates a ‘phantasmatic projection’.⁴⁵

1.2 Section 2: LA SEGUNDA CAÍDA – THE SECOND FALL Donning Masks

*I will take off my ski mask when Mexican society takes off its own mask, the one it uses to cover up the real Mexico [...] And once they have seen the real Mexico—as we have seen it—they will be more determined to change it.*⁴⁶
Subcomandante Marcos



Fig. 15

The anthropologist David Napier studies mask iconography and the role played by masks in the realization of change. He argues that masks become predominant during experiences of transition such as rites of passage, curative ceremonies, and funerary rites. ‘Masks [...] testify to an awareness of the ambiguities of appearance and to a tendency toward paradox characteristic of transitional states.’⁴⁷ As such, masks are a medium for exploring boundaries and challenging fixed identities. Using a mask is not a simple act of covering one’s face, but a substitution of a new face and a different identity for the wearer.

⁴² Botey, 2006, 313-14

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ cited in Elaine Katzenberger, *First World, Ha Ha Ha!: The Zapatista Challenge* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1995), 70

⁴⁷ David Napier, *Masks, Transformations, and Paradox* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1986), xxiii

In pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, the masks of the gods provided a metaphorical means of visualizing the transcendent, of defining the powers and differentiating between the various aspects of the world of the spirit.⁴⁸ When donned in ritual, the mask allowed men to emerge from the spirit and merge with it again. The artist, ethnographer and collector Donald Cordry points out that pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican cultures held that the wearing of a mask removed the face, hence the identity and soul of the wearer, and temporarily substituted a new face. This new identity was believed to allow the wearer to exert control over the forces of nature in order to benefit human welfare the mask was therefore associated with power.⁴⁹

Since 1994, the *pasamontaña* (ski mask) 'has been an emblem of resistance of the most novel and most bellicose Mexico'.⁵⁰ The historian Anne Rubenstein argues that the *pasamontaña* refers to the beloved 'lucha libre but also made an implicit promise that [the EZLN] would not allow themselves to be co-opted or used by the state'.⁵¹ As much as masks have been important to the EZLN, they also mattered greatly to pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, to religious dramas and ritual and to *lucha libre*.



Fig. 16

The mask designer, Victor Martínez, told me in a conversation in 2007 that

⁴⁸ For a detailed analyze see the chapter "The mask as God" in Robert H. Markman, Roberta H., and Peter. T. Markman's study *Masks of the Spirit: Image and Metaphor in Mesoamerica* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989)

⁴⁹ Donald Cordry, *Mexican Masks* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), 3-4

⁵⁰ Elena Poniatowska, "Forward: Taking Mexican Popular Culture by Storm" in *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico since 1940*, eds. Gilbert M. Joseph, Anne Rubenstein and Eric Zolov (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), xiv.

⁵¹ Anne Rubenstein, "Mass Media and Popular Culture in the Postrevolutionary Era," in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, ed. William H. Beezley and Michael C. Meyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 670

the tradition of wearing a mask within lucha libre had been started by the Irish luchador Ciclón McKey in 1933.⁵² Soon after lucha libre's debut, the first mask was made by his father, Antonio H. Martínez, at McKey's request.⁵³ However, according to José Luis Valero Mere the first masked luchador was Luis Núñez alias El Enmascarado, who had his debut on the April 22, 1934, in the old Arena México.⁵⁴ McKey would wrestle as La Maravilla Enmascarada (Masked Marvel) for about five years before other luchadores followed. On July 26, 1942, the biggest idol ever had his debut in the old Arena México: El Santo (The Saint), also known as El Enmascarado de Plata (The silver-masked Man).⁵⁵ Before becoming immortal with a silver cape and a silver mask, he had wrestled unmasked as Ruddy Guzmán, and masked as Murciélago II (Bat II) as well as El Hombre Rojo (The Red Men). El Santo initially caused a sensation because despite his name he was a rudo. In 1962 however, his transformation to técnico greatly enhanced his career and the audience loved him even more. By then El Santo was in good masked company as several luchadores had already put on masks. In 1955, *Box y Lucha* published a two-part photographic feature "Máscara Mania" ("mask mania") on masks.⁵⁶ Nonetheless the first masked wrestler La Maravilla Enmascarada did not appear in Mexico: his first appearance was in 1932 at the Arena Liberty Hall in El Paso, Texas.⁵⁷

Since the mid-twentieth century, masks, masking and unmasking have also figured prominently in literature. The most emblematic is the writer Octavio

⁵² When Victor Martínez' father died he took over the business and remains the premiere maker of custom-made lucha libre masks. <http://www.mtzwear.com/>

⁵³ In relation to the conversation between Antonio H. Martínez and Cyclón McKey are two diverging stories. In one Cyclón McKey requests a mask that would be like 'a hood, similar to that of the Ku Klux Klan.' This is the version Victor Martínez told me in an interview (2007) and Heather Levi (2008, 110) recounts it similarly in her book. In the other version Antonio H. Martínez asked Cyclón McKey 'Like that of the Ku Klux Klan?' (cited in Aguilar García, 2006) after McKey had requested something to cover his face. According to this version McKey negated it, as it would be too easy to take off. He needed something that had laces, like a shoe.

⁵⁴ José Luis Valero Mere, *Cien Años de Lucha Libre en México* (México D.F.: Anaya Editores, 1978) However, Mario Paniagua (2007, 24) points out that the magazine *Lucha Libre* (10 January 1969) varies in regard of two dates: La Maravilla Enmascarada had his debut in December 1934 and the third masked luchador was El Enmascarado Vasco, who appeared on the 26th of April 1934 in The Arena Peralvillo Cozumel and not, as José Luis Valero Mere stated, El Enmascarado de Chicago, who appeared on the 5th of January 1936 in the Arena México.

⁵⁵ In 1952 the movie *El Enmascarado de Plata* by René Cardona got released: It featured the luchador El Médico Asesino instead of Santo.

⁵⁶ *Lucha Libre*, "Máscara Mania I," March 1-15, 1955: 17-18 and *Lucha Libre*, "Máscara Mania II," March 16-30, 1955: 18-19

Since 1951 *Box y Lucha* is the oldest magazine dedicated to lucha libre and boxing.

⁵⁷ Some grant William Bill Lewis to be the first masked wrestler in 1917, but as Lewis used a skimask the majority insists that it was Masked Marvel. (Arana and Paniagua, 2007, 23)

Paz's essay "Mexican Masks," chapter two of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* that seems to express an anxiety over masks as a sign of inauthenticity and weakness that informs his treatise on the Mexican national character. 'The Mexican, seems [...] to be a person who shuts himself away to protect himself. His face is a mask and so is his smile.'⁵⁸ As I will show in the following sections, masks are used in a more complex manner than can be explained by this account of the defensive and inauthentic nature of the Mexican self, which constrains the mask's use to that of hiding a deep sense of alienation.

1.2.1 Past and Present: Masks in Performance, Danza and Lucha Libre

<i>Tres caídas me bastaron</i>	Three falls were enough
<i>Para darme cuenta</i>	For me to realize
<i>Que tu no eras mi aliada</i>	You weren't my ally
[...]	[...]
<i>No das la cara</i>	You don't face up
<i>Y nada es lo que antes era</i>	And nothing is what it used to be
<i>Arriesgo mi cabellera</i>	I'll risk my mane
<i>Para la máscara quitarte</i> ⁵⁹	To rip off your mask

In his performance at the Dance Theater Workshop (DTW), New York (October, 1994) the artist Sergio Arau, wearing a mask and singing these lyrics, refers to lucha libre and an EZLN press conference on August 8, 1994, where EZLN's spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, offered to reveal his identity. Referring to NAFTA, Arau declares: 'Now that we are going to be good neighbors it's time to leave hypocrisy behind. Let's take off our masks.'⁶⁰ The audience pleads for him not to remove his mask. 'Arau hesitates, then in one fell swoop takes [it] off only to reveal a second [jaguar]-skin mask

⁵⁸ Octavio Paz, "Mexican Mask," in *The Labyrinth of Solitude, the other Mexico, and other essays*, (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 29

⁵⁹ Sergio Arau y Los Mismisimos Angeles, "Tres Caidas," *Sergio Arau y Los Mismisimos Angeles*, 1994

⁶⁰ Yareli Arizmendi, "Whatever Happened to the Sleepy Mexican?: One Way to Be a Contemporary Mexican in a Changing World Order," *The Drama Review*. 38 (1994): 109.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is an agreement signed by the governments of the United States, Canada, and Mexico creating a trilateral trade bloc in North America. The agreement came into force on January 1, 1994.

underneath. The audience claps in surprise and relief, honor has been preserved, negotiations are not over yet.⁶¹ Arau presents us with a play of allusions. He attempts to free us from one by his unmasking but instead provides us with another one.

‘In the United States, wrestlers started to use masks, but it didn’t stick,’⁶² Arau, who was born in Mexico and currently resides in California, explains. ‘But in Mexico, I say and as I suppose the anthropologist say, it seems more logical that we use masks, because all our ethnic groups... employ masks in their rituals.’⁶³ During his performance, Arau revealed a jaguar mask that is central to the variations of the danza del tigre (tiger dance) that can be found throughout Mesoamerica.⁶⁴ Some of these dances embed pre-Hispanic elements in a ritual with numerous Christian elements while others have been incorporated into carnival activities. Generally, the danzas del tigre share an involvement with violence and sexuality.



Fig. 17

In Grobet’s photos (1981) depicted here (Fig. 17), boys dress as jaguars and hold rope whips that are a lethal weapon reminiscent of the pre-Hispanic macuahuitl used by Mexica warriors.⁶⁵ Moreover, the boys wear lucha libre masks under their masks of tigers. According to Möbius it is not a coincidence that they use a lucha libre mask. Möbius argues that they could use other materials to protect them from their hard leather masks. Because these boys

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² cited in Levi, 2008, 105-106

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ The representation of jaguars in Mesoamerican cultures has a long history and in pre-Hispanic Central and South America, the jaguar has long been a symbol of earth, rain, fertility and as such of power and strength.

⁶⁵ Roberto Williams García, *Las fiestas de la Santa Cruz en Zitlala* (México: Fondo Naquional para el fomento a la Danza, 1974), 2

know lucha libre mainly through television, they consider the lucha libre mask as power and strength.⁶⁶ However, I argue, the use of a mask under yet another one is more complex: As masks serve the functions of displaying, concealing, substituting and transitioning, they are at once surface and depth. To employ two masks at once offers the dancers more than one layer which means yet another opportunity of not being recognized either by their own community or by the danza's visitors. Similar to Arau, they present several hidden hints and effects. I think that one mask does not necessarily imply one fixed role. Consequently, bringing more masks into play with each other implies that a multiplicity of roles, interpretations and layers are at stake. A possible reading of this could be that, in the moment two masks are employed, more than one role is embodied. The one visible at the first glance, which is known by and incorporated into the community, and the one that might be only significant to its wearer – and never, or only after the danza, presented to the public. As long as the dancers wear their masks of, for example, the tigers, the community knows how to interact with them. But as soon as another mask is revealed these reactions are not clearly defined anymore. The mask under the mask might be the actual or the desired role, the one that might simultaneously undermine, twist and remain in constant dialogue with the first.

The boys depicted above are part of the combat of tigers for opposing barrios (neighbourhoods) that is enacted on May 2, el día de la Santa Cruz (Day of the Holy Cross), in Zitlala, Guerrero. The fighters 'trade blows until they are gravely wounded'⁶⁷, so 'that by shedding human blood, the jaguar deity will release his own blood in the form of rain which then fertilizes the maize crop.'⁶⁸ The tiger does not have a principal role in the Mesoamerican activities of carnival, which includes different dances whose names and themes –not to mention the attire of their performers– vary from one town and region to another, but instead the tiger's role defines their parameters in a significant

⁶⁶ Möbius, 2004, 191f

⁶⁷ Juan Sanchez Andraka, *Zitlala, por el Mágico Mundo Indígena Guerrerense*, Tomo I, (Guerrero: Fondo de Apoyo Editorial del Gobierno del Estado de Guerrero, 1983), 5

⁶⁸ Neil Saunders, *Icons of Power: Feline Symbolism in the Americas*. (New York: Routledge, 1998), 38-39

way. For example, when the Mixtec tiger is not fighting his would-be killers, assaulting the cow or other animal characters, he is preoccupied with sexual concerns.⁶⁹ He uses ‘his principal attribute –his long tail– constantly: he masturbates with it, uses it sexually to violate the cow [...] while the others assault him sexually, handling him now as a woman, now as a man and, with his complicity, imitating either homosexual or heterosexual coitus.’⁷⁰

The danza del tigre is one example of a variety of widespread uses of masks in religious dramas and rituals, danzas or combats in rural Mexico and Mesoamerica in general. During the danza, masks grant their users authority and/or immunity, they empower to mock, to interfere, and to perform actions that might be considered as inappropriate. Even though the connection between the lucha libre masks and these employments are indirect, I suppose that the association between masks used by rural, indigenous people and lucha libre allows lucha libre to be “againsttogether” the past and the present.

1.2.2 A Craze for Masks, Masking and Unmasking



Fig. 18

Today, lucha libre masks are so widespread and so easy to purchase that they are found not only during carnival, but during football matches, public fiestas, and even at Surf rock concerts, during which the majority of the bands’ members and the audience employ them.⁷¹ The lucha libre mask is not only a symbol to represent lucha libre but also one to represent Mexico in transnational contexts.⁷²

Within the luchas, the use of the mask not only questions the division of public

⁶⁹ The Mixtec (or Mixteca) are indigenous people inhabiting a region known as La Mixteca in the Mexican states of Oaxaca, Guerrero and Puebla.

⁷⁰ Véronique Flanet, *Viviré, Si Dios Quiere: Un Estudio de la Violencia en la Mixteca de la Costa* (México D.F.: Instituto Naquional Indigenista, 1977), 172

⁷¹ Surf rock is a subgenre of rock music associated with surf culture, particularly Orange County and other areas of Southern California. It was particularly popular between 1961 and 1965 and has subsequently been revived at the end of the 80ies and 90ies in Mexico with bands like Lost Acapulco, Los Esquitos, Sr. Bikini among others. See Marie Benito, *Surf, o tronar*, 2008

⁷² For example during her performance of “La turista” Nelly Fortado was accompanied by two dancers with lucha libre masks: Nelly Furtado, “La turista,” 2009, *You Tube*, accessed August 01, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buXBvWTIWmM&feature=related>.

and private spheres but also refuses to subject the luchadoris, who mask themselves, to the public gaze. The lucha libre mask defines and marks the role, as the luchador Mil Máscaras (Thousand Masks) puts it:

I have another life, another style, another way of being. You see me and ask me for an autograph, although you already know me I can deny it, a nephew tells me - hey uncle, give me an autograph I say No, the day you see me masked, ask me for an autograph. Mil Máscaras is the character, Mil Máscaras is single, has no children, since there is no Misses Mil Máscaras...⁷³

In this sense, the mask marks the moment when people are clearly recognizable as luchadoris. It is also what the following action by the artist Maris Bustamante also exemplifies:



Fig. 19

The images above (Fig. 19), called *Luchadora*, depict the artist herself in her mask photographed by Lourdes Almeida. In 1994, the grandson of El Santo and his agent approached Bustamante to be his godmother, helping to design ‘acciones especiales’ (special actions).⁷⁴ When he changed his old mask, Bustamante organized a meeting with friends and the press where she handed him over the new mask designed by herself for Argenis el Ángel de Plata (Argénis the Silver Angel). While he ultimately did not fight as Argenis el

⁷³ cited in Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares, *La Lucha la Hacemos Todos*, Booklet and unpublished materials of the exhibition 1992, (México D.F., 1992)

Translation from Spanish: ‘Yo tengo otra vida, otra forma, otra manera de ser. Usted me ve y me pide un autógráfico, aunque ya me conozca se lo puedo negar, un sobrino me dice, - oye tío, dame un autógráfico yo le digo que no, el día que me veas enmascarado, entonces si pídemelo el autógráfico-. Mil Máscaras es el personaje, Mil Máscaras – es soltero, no tiene hijos, pues no existe la señora del Mil Máscaras...’

⁷⁴ Maris Bustamante, “Luchadora,” 1996, *Archivo Virtual de Artes Escénicas*, accessed November 15, 2011, <http://artesescenicas.uclm.es/index.php?sec=obras&id=1126&lang=es>.

Ángel de Plata, he gave her in exchange her own “professional” mask that depicts an M for Maris. For the purpose of ‘acciones gráficas’ (graphical actions), Bustamante realized photographs that also point to a collaboration between two artists who apply a whole string of forms and mediums, with the body among them.⁷⁵ Moreover, the *Luchadora* action might be considered a follow up or a direct reference to a poster (Fig. 20), that Bustamante realized as part of the collective No-Grupo (No Group).⁷⁶



Fig. 20

No-Grupo made this poster for the Primer Coloquio Latinoamericano sobre Arte No-Objetual (First Latin American Colloquium of Non-Object Art) that took place in 1981 in Medellín, Colombia. It poses a luchador, El Santo, representing the conceptual artists united under the name No-Grupo. They are a “¡Vanguardia Salvaje! (Savage Avantgarde!)” in which the artists rename themselves as luchadoris, focusing attention on lucha libre and creating a “Montage de Momentos Plasticos” (montage of artistic moments) and movements. The graphic design of the poster also refers to or appropriates the aesthetics of historietas (comics), which initiated in and were overwhelmingly popular but extremely controversial in post-revolutionary Mexico.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Founded in 1977 as a workshop in which to discuss projects collectively, the *No-Grupo* was initially made up of a large number of artists. Nevertheless, the members of the group who remained in it throughout the entirety of its active life until 1983 were Maris Bustamante, Rubén Valencia, Melquíades Herrera, and Alfredo Núñez.

⁷⁷ More see Anne Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, & Other Threats to the Nation. A Political History of*

The writer Andrew Coe assigns the success of the masks less to the masks' pre-Hispanic past and their ritual use rather to a crossover between wrestling and historietas. According to him, the introduction of masks in lucha libre coincided with a craze for historietas featuring masked heroes.⁷⁸ I would argue, however, that the success of the masks cannot only be explained by the craze for masked heroes appearing in historietas. I propose that it is a combination of the masks' pre-Hispanic past, their ritual use, their ability to display, conceal, substitute and transition at once, *and* the popularity of historietas featuring masked characters. I even wonder if it was not the appearance of masked luchadores in the ring shortly before the historietas that facilitated the success of, for example, *El Fantasma (The Phantom)*? Without a doubt, they stimulated each other.



Fig. 21

While Octavio Paz denounced the formalism that was the symptom of the fundamentally defensive and inauthentic nature of the Mexican self, the historian and anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz-Adler proposes that masks are not used to hide a deep sense of alienation.⁷⁹ Rather, the metaphoric masks of 'forms' should instead be understood to have functions analogous to those of actual masks used in ritual as they allow the wearer to embody a role.⁸⁰ This capacity is

important as it can be seen in relation to the social wrestlers and Subcomandante Marcos.⁸¹ In 1995, the Mexican government attempted to reveal Subcomandante Marcos' identity by identifying him as Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente, a Mexican national from Tampico, Tamaulipas. Marcos and the EZLN denied this but perhaps more importantly, a nation-

Comic Books in Mexico (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998)

⁷⁸ cited in Levi, 1997, 64

Following historietas featured masked heroes: *The Phantom (El Fantasma)* an American adventure comic strip created by Lee Falk (1911-1999), *El Hombre Araña* (Spiderman), *Batman El Hombre Murciélago* (both were also part of *Paquito*), and the historieta treatment of Alejandro Dumas's *El hombre de la máscara de hierro* (Man in the Iron Mask).

⁷⁹ Paz, 1985, 29-46

⁸⁰ Claudio Lomnitz Adler, *Exits from the Labyrinth: Culture and Ideology in Mexican National Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 242-43

⁸¹ Paz, 1985, 29-46

wide public and spontaneous un-official campaign sprung up in response.⁸² Popular support for Marcos and the EZLN movement was crystallised in the slogan: ‘Todos Somos Marcos’ (We Are All Marcos). Héctor Sánchez de la Madrid emphasizes that no one really wanted to get to know Marco’s identity: ‘It is something similar to the masked wrestlers, if you take the mask off, you want to know who he is but the people will be disappointed because they won’t recognize him anymore.’⁸³ Masking makes obvious the complex relationship between secrecy and power. As much as it seems that all knew the man and the face behind the mask, they were not interested in it. As such, they were all part of the secrecy, being aware of its power to extend, to keep alive the mask.



Fig. 22

As mentioned in the introduction, I propose that secrecy was yet another point that political movements drew from lucha libre. The EZLN has appeared even more powerful as they exploit secrecy, but apply it strategically. In the moment Marcos becomes Rafael, the call of ‘Todos Somos Marcos’ can no longer be applied – it would be difficult to imagine and proclaim a collective without the mask. As such, the mask not only allows the luchadoris to take on different roles, it also allows them to subsume their own identity and to assume a role and/or to pass for the persona by which they want to be seen. By upholding the mask, they make a serious commitment never to be seen or to get unmasked as it might result in a loss of honour, charisma, and

⁸² Levi views in their response an echo to an incident involving the masked luchador Hijo del Santo during his divorce as his still wife sent photographs of his unmasked face to the press. The luchador responded simply by denying that he was the man in the photographs. See Heather Levi, “The Mask of the Luchador: Wrestling, Politics, and Identity in Mexico,” in ed. Nicholas Sammond, *Steel Chair To The Head. The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995)

⁸³ cited in Héctor Sánchez de la Madrid, “A local eye on the Zapatista Movement,” *Globalisethis - New Media for Peace*, 2009, accessed March 29, 2010, <http://globalisethis.wordpress.com/2009/10/02/interview-1/>.

ultimately, power.

In the arena there are two ways in which a luchadori can be unmasked. First, it can be done forcibly and illegally – usually by a rudi, sometimes by a técnico. If this occurs in the course of a lucha, the expected behaviour of the unmasked luchadori is to hide his/her face and to begin an act of outrage and/or shame until the mask is returned. It humiliates the unmasked and disqualifies the unmasker. Second, in a lucha de apuesta (bet), a luchadori will publicly bet his/her mask (or hair, if already unmasked) on the outcome against the opponent's mask or hair. The most common forms are the máscara vs. máscara (mask-against-mask), cabellera vs. cabellera (hair-against-hair), or máscara vs. cabellera (mask-against-hair) matches. Immediately after the lucha, the loser's hair gets shaved. Hair is valuable but since it grows back, it is obviously not as important as the mask, which has to be removed right afterwards and is lost for good.⁸⁴ The luchadori with an exposed face might retain his/her character, his/her career might collapse or s/he moves on to a new figure. Hence, part of the audience's pleasure is related to the deferral of the luchadori's revelation as the mask allows everyone to identify with him/her and to proclaim "Tod[i]s somos ..."



Fig. 23

When I am at the arena, among the audience, I am surrounded by several luchadoris. Until the beginning of 2011, before he left to the WWE in the U.S.A., Místico was all over the place as a variety of genders, ages and sizes.⁸⁵ The mask allows the audience to show their beloved luchadoris their respect, to identify with the luchadoris creating a particular connection between them. Through wearing the masks it is possible to assume the luchadoris' role, to playfully interact with the rest of the audience, to let go, and to thus participate in the

⁸⁴ Nevertheless I consider it important to point out that the act of losing hair might have different meanings and implications if happening to a man or a woman. As one association, the biblical narrative of Samson who loses strength with the loss of hair comes to my mind.

⁸⁵ Beginning of 2011 Místico caused a scandal as he left, according to media coverage, without having asked CMLL for permission, to WorldWrestlingEntertainment (WWE). As CMLL owns the copyright of Místico's persona, he now wrestles with a slightly different mask and under the name Sin Cara in the U.S.

luchas. Moreover, the audience can proclaim *Tod[i]s somos ...* in which the body becomes another body, and also plays with what it means to be in a body with others.

As examined, the *lucha libre* mask might be linked to its pre-Hispanic past and to its ritual use. Levi points out that this association might also allow *lucha libre* to represent a model of culture that transcends the 'division between the modern and the indigenous.'⁸⁶ The mask is also aligned to the pre-Hispanic past and as such associates *lucha libre* with the idea of a unified national culture. However, as the literary scholar Robert Neustadt puts it:

To talk of 'the nation' is to mask difference(s) – to reconfigure and cover contradictory features in order to represent and lift the face of an imaginary national community' and he claims that 'society's marginalized Others can make use of masks as a performance strategy that calls attention to the masking process.'⁸⁷

The 'marginalized Others'⁸⁸ of the EZLN have been making use of the *pasamontaña* in order to call attention through emphasizing *Detrás de nosotr[i]s estamos ustedes* (Behind us, we are you) as much as *Tod[i]s somos...*⁸⁹ Marcos especially has carefully constructed his image to draw on the beloved heroes of Mexican history and draw international sympathy. As the performance artist Guillermo Gómez Peña observes: 'His serious but nonchalant demeanor, adorned with a pipe and a Zapata-style *bandolera* with bullets that don't match the model of his weapon, made him extremely photogenic. His persona was a carefully crafted collage of twentieth-century revolutionary symbols, costumes, and props borrowed from Zapata, Sandino, Ché, and Arafat as well as from celluloid heroes such as Zorro and Mexico's movie wrestler, "El Santo".'⁹⁰ Hence Gómez Peña considers Marcos:

⁸⁶ Levi, 2008, 134

⁸⁷ Robert Neustadt, 2001, "(E)Facing the Face of Nationalism: Wrestling Masks in Chicano and Mexican Performance Art," *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature*, 25 (2001): 415.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ EZLN, 1997, 314

⁹⁰ Guillermo, Gómez Peña, "The Subcomandante of Performance," in *First World, Ha Ha Ha! The Zapatista*

[...] undoubtedly the latest popular hero in a noble tradition of activists which includes Superbarrio, Fray Tormenta (the wrestler priest), and Super-Ecologista, all self-proclaimed “social wrestlers” who have utilized performance and media strategies to enter in the political “wrestling arena” of contemporary Mexico.⁹¹

The act of using a mask allows the luchadori to become a transcendent, mythic figure as much as it allows Marcos to be one and, as pointed out before, the mask allows the audience to identify with them, to imagine and proclaim a collective.



The deployment of masks –their ability to display, conceal, substitute and transition at once– may open up a variety of possibilities for critiquing and transgressing racial and ethnic norms. The various uses and appropriations of lucha libre masks and their actual and/or metaphorical implications, as discussed above, have found their ways into different fields and are applied to different degrees. After establishing and exploring discourses of mexicanidad, mestizaje and

Fig. 24

indigenismo which operated during the post-revolutionary period and so from lucha libre’s beginnings, I am wondering what terms are in use now? We have seen that lucha libre does not simply fit into nor fulfill the hegemonic articulations of national identity. Lucha libre’s play of masks especially complicate these terms and power relations. In the following section, I will discuss the terms *pelado* (“peeled” - barren, bleak, or exposed) and *naco* (tacky, of low culture, ignorant, lacking education) as contemporary masks in the reconfiguration of lucha libre’s audience.⁹² *Pelado* and *naqui* as masks attempt to elicit their (mutual) imbrications through exploring how they have been perceived, wrestled over and used. *Pelado* and *naqui*, I suggest, foreground their scorning connotations when they are understood as masks that are imposed on people to mark them as different from the ones who

Challenge, ed. Elaine Katzenberger (San Francisco: City Lights, 1995), 91

⁹¹ Gómez Peña, 1995, 90

⁹² From this moment on I shall refer to *naco* as *naqui*.

impose. Naqui especially, as we will see, has often been applied as a discriminating and classifying description of the participants as much as of the imagery of the luchas. What is lost and what is found when these masks slip – when meanings of words are broken and/or transformed? This question provides me not only a tool for transformation but also a sensitive base to produce critical positions in the here and now.

1.3 Section 3: LA TERCERA CAÍDA – THE THIRD FALL Pelado and Naqui as Masks

In the first seventeen years of lucha libre, from 1930 to 1950, Mexico City experienced a big wave of migration from the countryside as the city almost tripled its population, reaching over three million inhabitants in 1950.⁹³ These migrants spoke some of the 364 variants of the 68 indigenous languages still spoken today, added to already existing communities of urban working- and lower-class peoples.⁹⁴ They did not fit into the homogenizing representation of Indians as they participated in urban modernity, nor were they representations of ‘the affable and reasonable member(s) of the middle classes’⁹⁵ that were promoted as the national ideal.



Fig. 25

Before the 1950s, urban migrants had been stereotyped, homogenized and

⁹³ Instituto nacional de estadística y geografía, “Censo de Población y Vivienda 1930. Población de las Capitales de Entidad,” accessed August, 02, 2011, <http://www.inegi.org.mx/sistemas/TabuladosBasicos/default.aspx?c=16767&s=est>.

In 1930 Mexico City had 1.029.068 and in 1950 3.050.442 inhabitants.

⁹⁴ Instituto nacional de lenguas indígenas, “Catálogo de las Lenguas Indígenas Nacionales, 2008,” accessed August 02, 2011, http://www.cdi.gob.mx/lenguamaterna/catalogo_lenguas_indigenas_mexico_2008.pdf.

⁹⁵ Claudio Lomnitz Adler, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 74

insulted by the word *pelado*. The literal meaning of *pelado* is someone whose skin has been peeled and is thus hypersensitive and inclined to be defensive. The poor man –women seem to be nonexistent in the process of the mythic *pelado*– is thus identified with his lack of possessions, of education, simply of everything, but with criminal tendencies.⁹⁶ For Bartra, the mythical *pelado*, who is the figure of cultural and racial *mestizaje*, represents the modern Mexican state of confusion, corruption and chaos.⁹⁷ By the mid-1950s, however, *pelado* began to disappear and *naqui* –‘the evident replacement’⁹⁸– made its appearance in Mexico City.

By contrast to *pelado*, the term *naqui* is still very much around in Mexico City and its varied implications were worth a whole lesson during my Spanish course at the UNAM in 2008. Over time, as I will discuss, *naqui* has undergone several transformations in meaning. While the origin of the term is rooted in racial stereotyping and discrimination, the way *naqui* is used today indicates that it supposedly can be applied to anyone regardless of race, ethnicity or class. *Naqui* is thus used as a mask that is imposed on people so as to mark them different.

According to a sociolinguistic study by Sandra Strikovsky, ‘the meaning of [*naqui*] varies depending on the age of the speaker, and that the tendency to perceive the term as insulting is based on generational difference too.’⁹⁹ The definitions that some dictionaries offer seem thus somehow general and succinct. The *Diccionario Usual en México* defines *naqui* as a colloquial and offensive word that has two meanings: ‘(1) who is Indian or native of Mexico, (2) who is ignorant and clumsy, lacking education.’¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, the definition of Francisco Santamaría in his *Diccionario de mejicanismos* reads

⁹⁶ Carlos Monsiváis, *Mexican Postcards* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 98

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 180

⁹⁸ Carlos Monsiváis, “Léperos y catrines, nacos y yupis,” 1995a, accessed August 24, 2011, <http://www.mty.itesm.mx/dhcs/deptos/ri/ri-802/lecturas/nvas.lecs/sal/leperos.html>.

Translation from Spanish: ‘El sustituto evidente es el naco.’

⁹⁹ Sandra, Strikovsky, “Estudio sociolingüístico de la palabra “naco”,” 2006, accessed August 02, 2011, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/15238873/Estudio-sociolingüístico-de-la-palabra-naco>.

¹⁰⁰ Translation from Spanish: ‘El *Diccionario Usual en México* (1) que es indio o indígena de México; (2) que es ignorante y torpe, que carece de educación. En la misma línea, el *Diccionario Breve de Mexicanismos* registra: (Posiblemente de *totonaco*.) 1. Indio, indígena. II 2. De bajo nivel cultural, ignorante.’

as following:

1. (From otomí, naco, brother) m. In Tlaxcala, Indian with white shorts . 2. In Guerrero, the Indian natives of the state are called [naqui], and, by extension, the clumsy, ignorant and illiterate. "The natives are called nacos and sometimes, in a derogatory manner, the unprepared, saying for example: 'You're naco,' implying unprepared, stupid".¹⁰¹

According to Lomnitz-Adler and Monsiváis, the term originated as a contraction of Totonaco (the name of an indigenous group) but, as the definition of Francisco Santamaría shows it might be more generally related to native indigenous peoples from different parts in Mexico.¹⁰² Monsiváis explains that the

term na[qui] goes beyond socioeconomic identification (before it was said, "he may have a lot of money, but he's basically a peasant"; now it has become "he may have millions, but he'll always be naco") [...] It eventually becomes one of the many vehicles through which the cultural contempt for Indians is articulated.¹⁰³

Concurring with Monsiváis, it seems to me that the imposed mask of naqui – which names one as inferior, base, or worthless– may slip but cannot be entirely removed. For example, soon before Grobet started her involvement with *lucha libre*, naqui slipped once again, but simply transformed itself into another reference – this time, an urban aesthetic. Naqui now largely refers to a very particular form of kitsch that 'is considered vulgar because it incorporates aspirations toward progress and material culture of modernity in an imperfect and partial way.'¹⁰⁴ It is worth noting, however, that naqui stands in opposition to the word it once replaced: whereas *pelado* was characterized

¹⁰¹ Francisco J. Santamaría, *Diccionario de mejicanismos* (México D.F.: Editorial Porrúa, 1959)

Translation from Spanish: '1. (Del otomí, naco, cuñado) m. En Tlaxcala, indio de calzones blancos. 2. En Guerrero llaman así a los indígenas nativos del Estado y, por extensión, al torpe, ignorante e iletrado. "Nacos llaman a los nativos y también a veces, en forma despectiva, a los impreparados, diciendo por ejemplo: 'tú eres naco', dando a entender impreparado, tonto".'

¹⁰² Claudio Lomnitz Adler, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 111; Monsiváis, "Léperos y catrines, nacos y yupis." 1995a

The Totonaco peoples resided in the eastern coastal and mountainous regions of Mexico at the time of the Spanish arrival in 1519. Today they mainly reside in the Sierra Madre Oriental between the states Puebla and Veracruz.

¹⁰³ Monsiváis, 1997, 102

¹⁰⁴ Lomnitz-Adler, 2001, 112

by its lack to culture, naqui is characterized by its excess of culture, even if it is a kitschy one. Lomnitz-Adler argues that the root of the different use of the term naqui lay in the shift to a different social and cultural period, which was in large part caused by the 1982 debt crises that ended Mexico's regime of import substitution industrialization and models for self-sustained growth.¹⁰⁵ Before, naqui had marked the indigenous peoples inappropriately situated in urban space whereas now it aimed at 'a (low-status) aesthetics [...] that is arguably applicable to the vast majority of the urban population'.¹⁰⁶ Lomnitz-Adler further explains that unlike the 'old elite' who seeks to keep distinctions between high and low, foreign and national culture, 'the popular na[qui] breaks with the weight of tradition' and in doing so they undo exactly these distinctions.¹⁰⁷ Might this be yet another reason why masks were so successful in the luchas? Since the 'urban Indians'¹⁰⁸ in the arenas were masked as naquis, could they have found it empowering to put on yet other masks? It is a play of masks as subversive gesture: I argue that they were fed up with the one that was imposed upon them. They did not want to live up to the imposed one. The act of donning other masks might have made it possible to become less vulnerable to all scorns. Over your mask of us, we lay ours. In this sense masks have provided the 'urban Indians'¹⁰⁹ a space from which to obtrude and thus to crack and deal with the imposed mask; to become subjects of their own discourses, the luchas and the arena.



Fig. 26

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 114

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 113

¹⁰⁸ cited in Gabara, 2010, 284

¹⁰⁹ cited in Gabara, 2010, 284

1.3.1 Lucha Libre as Naca: The Reconfiguration of The Audience

It is not a surprise that the emergence of the term *naqui* coincided with the first boom of *lucha libre*. In the early 1950s, *lucha libre* began to disseminate outside of the context of the ring into the circulation of printed media, television and cinema.¹¹⁰ In 1952, four movies that featured *luchadores* were released.¹¹¹ As different as they were from each other –a melodrama, a comedy, a parody and an action movie– they were forerunners to the over 300 movies yet to come until 1983.¹¹²



Fig. 27

Contrary to the movie theatres, *lucha libre* was pulled off the air a few years after its debut in 1954 and it has been only aired again as of 1991.¹¹³ It could be argued then that the medium of television and all that comes along with it did not have an influence on *lucha libre* in its first 50 years. In these years, the *luchas* took place without the help of television, emphasising the exchange with the audience and focusing on visual, gestural, acrobatic and agile movements rather than on the camera. Through the ban of *lucha libre* from television, the arenas with their *luchas*, as Levi notes, ‘became the exclusive and unmediated property of *la clase naca*.’¹¹⁴ In this sense, the ban not only reconfigured its audience, it also reveals the increasing distance between the popular classes and the growing middle class, which might also be related to the different seekings that Lomnitz-Adler points out above.

Though the *Cine de luchadores* was widely popular across social classes, for the middle and upper classes that had attended the arenas before, the *luchas*

¹¹⁰ In 1954 the still running magazine *BOX Y LUCHA* was founded. *El Santo* appeared as a protagonist of a *fotonovela* named after him by José G. Cruz.

¹¹¹ *El enmascarado de plata* by José G. Cruz and René Cardona, *La bestia magnífica* by Chano Urueta, *Huracán Ramírez* by Joselito Rodríguez, *El luchador fenómeno* by Fernando Cortés.

¹¹² *Lucha libre* movies are still made nowadays but they are far less popular than during their golden years. In 2010 the animation *AAA, la película: Sin límite en el tiempo* by Alberto Rodríguez premiered. In the frame of the Guanajuato International Film Festival 2011 with the production of Lemon Films, the *Rally Pro: cámara contra cabellera* (*Rally Pro: camera vs hair*) took place: This competition was attended by four production houses and each made in 48 hours a short movie starring a *luchador* from *AAA*.

¹¹³ More see Levi, 2001, 338-341

¹¹⁴ Levi, 2001, 343

noe mainly took place at the movie theatres where they could watch luchadores like Blue Demon, Mil Máscaras and El Santo, who appeared in 50 movies, wrestle against anything obviously villain and/or alien. At the end of the movies law and order returns to maintain but also to keep the distinctions between high and low as well as foreign and national culture alive. With the middle and higher classes flocking to the movie theatres, a seemingly protected distance was kept from the naquis filling the arenas. So the “(Re)Indianization”, which the naquis seem to represent, could supposedly not harm them.¹¹⁵ It does not come as a surprise then that the Cine de luchadores was not interested in representing “(Re)Indianization”, which may be considered as a latent threat to hegemonic national articulations. They rather embraced “de-Indianization” coupled with economic and social –thus class– advancement.¹¹⁶ In the Cine de luchadores, the luchador is generally presented as an individual hero, localized within the lone male, even if working with the law. In the arena, the luchadoris rather have wrestled “againtogether” in teams of three. Following Levi’s line of thoughts that lucha libre is naca, and following Lomnitz-Adler explanation that the naqui undoes the distinction of legitimate urban upper classes –high culture– and rural indigenous peoples –low culture–, these movies did not challenge the differentiation of high and low, foreign and national culture.

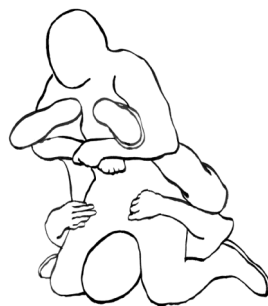


Fig. 28

At the end of the 1970s the word naqui was popularized through the Mexican

¹¹⁵ Claudio Bonfil Batalla, *Utopía y Revolución: El pensamiento político contemporáneo de los indios en América Latina* (Mexico: Nueva Imágen, 1981), 123

¹¹⁶ Claudio Bonfil Batalla, 2004, 17

‘De-Indianization is a historical process through which populations that originally possessed a particular and distinctive identity, based upon their culture are forced to renounce that identity with all the consequent changes in their social organization and culture.’

comedian Luis de Alba (born 1945). With his character, El Pirrurris, who appeared regularly in his TV program, *El mundo de Luis de Alba* (*Luis de Alba's World*, 1978-81), he altered once more the meaning of *naqui*. This character is a very rich and young man with a haircut similar to one used by the Beatles in their early years. El Pirrurris ridicules low- to middle class people with illusions of grandeur and importance, bad taste and a particular tone and use of slang in their way of speaking. Such people were pejoratively called *naquis*. El Pirrurris refined the ridicule of *naquis* into *nacology*, the study of the *naqui*, in which he appeared sitting behind a desk to explain “*el naco del día*” (“the *naco* of the day”) to his audience in scientific terms. In this sense, El Pirrurris is also a parody of the young sons and daughters of upper-class Mexicans, known for their tendency to dismiss anyone else as a *naqui*. The character El Pirrurris seems to have expanded the scope of the term, which is no longer related only to indigenous people, the most disadvantaged group or those with tacky taste, but rather to anyone who was not rich.

Ten years later, in 1991, *lucha libre* had its comeback on television, which paralleled the shift that Mexico underwent through neo-liberal reforms’ implementation in the early 1990s.¹¹⁷ For the few *luchadoris* who first appeared on television this change was profitable, but generally it had negative consequences as in the coming years fewer people went to the arenas, where vendors of food, drinks, and *lucha libre* paraphernalia recorded losses. In 1992, strikes of *luchadoris* against the *luchas*’ transmission on Sundays followed, as these were the most lucrative days for them. They did not succeed; in 2012 the *luchas* of Triple AAA can be watched each Sunday at 3pm and the ones of IWRG at 9:30pm. As such, if one lives in Mexico City, s/he can first watch AAA on television, afterwards join the *luchas* of CMLL at one of their arenas, and be back home to turn on TV for IWRG.

Unsurprisingly, *lucha libre*’s mass media dissemination on television also made the *luchas* increasingly susceptible to commercialization, co-optation

¹¹⁷ After the bankruptcy in 1982, the government planned a radical change in its economical strategies, through a series of neo-liberal policies. During the next two decades it focused on attracting international capitals and opening itself to foreign markets. In 1986 Mexico jointed WTO and in 1994 NAFTA (North America Free Trade Area) in 1994, designing its role in the global economy.

and/or endorsements. Since then, luchadoris, or images of them, star in commercials for energy drinks, endorsing the Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party, PAN) political party in Mexico and designers such as NaCo..¹¹⁸ The designer clothes line NaCo. picked up (and capitalized) on the relationship between lucha libre and naqui in 1998. On NaCo.'s internet presence –from their website to myspace, twitter and facebook– what is visible are young hipsters, stars from the music and film world, and a mix of ads – among them for t-shirts that proclaim: “RUDO La Leyenda Azul (The Blue Legend) / Gimnasio de Lucha Libre (Gymnasium of Lucha libre)” and “PICALÉ LOS OJOS JALALE LOS PELOS SACALO DEL RING (STING THE EYES PULL THE HAIR THROW HIM OUT OF THE RING)”¹¹⁹

NaCo., a combination of the word “naco” and “company”, was set up by Edoardo Chavarín and Robby Vient along with their famous co-owners Diego Luna and José María Yazpik. They sell t-shirts, hats, backpacks, wallets and other apparel and accessories that are inspired by street culture, sports and lucha libre aesthetics. NaCo. products appeal to a large audience and promote an aesthetic of naqui that operates in a transnational context with production of limited edition lines for international tours and events such as the Grammy's and MTV Latino Awards. Their catch phrase “Ser Naco Es Chido” / “To Be Naco is Cool” captures their project of reclaiming naqui to be a positive and celebratory identity category.¹²⁰ The company defines naqui as a previously pejorative term used by upper- and middle class Mexicans as to describe those:

beneath them in terms of fashion, taste and economic level. It is commonly used as a synonym for “poor and ignorant,” but la naqués does not know status or educational level. La naqués is absolute sincerity. [...] That what is not liked does not have

¹¹⁸ In 2009 by the luchador Místico See Místico, “Anuncio del Pan,” 2009, accessed May 09, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpq3tVMcz3Q&feature=related>.

¹¹⁹ This sentence is taken from the famous cumbia song “Los luchadores” composed by Pedro Guadarrama Ocadiz y Héctor Zapata Ferrer and recorded by the band *Conjunto África*.

¹²⁰ The rock band Botellita de Jerez (Sergio Arau, Armando Vega Gil and Francisco “El Mastuerzo” Barrios) named their album “Naco is Chido” in 1987. In 2009 “¡Naco es Chido!” by Sergio Arau premiered: It is a mockumentary on the return of the band Botellita de Jerez, who disappeared along with their new record after a fistfight. 20 years later, the infamous missing recordings are found in a junkyard, prompting an investigation in search of the band's founders. <http://nacoeschido.com/>

importance. The na[qui] is a style that goes beyond the kitsch, the camp or the exacerbated schmalzty. It is spiritual in its acceptance of the I [...] To be Na[qui] is more a state of mind, not caring what others think of you, without being arrogant or closed. La naqués is to be yourself no matter if one is good or not. Ultimately, being na[qui] is to be yourself.¹²¹

Even if NaCo. admits to a class distinction in the term naqui, it contradicts itself by neglecting any knowledge of social position or educational level. It claims to resignify naqui by making the kitschy hip and to be sincere, open and accepting. Everything that it does not like, however, does not matter for the naqui and it thus refuses to recognize any trace of racism. In one of its 2006 designs, NaCo. alludes to yet another story. The company featured a pink t-shirt with a five-level cake, the kind on display at quinceañeras (parties thrown to celebrate girls when they turn fifteen).



Fig. 29

The photo above (Fig. 29) depicts twelve adolescent women lined up against a graffiti-covered wall. As Gabara points out '[i]t is difficult to discuss this image without reifying phenotypical designations of race.'¹²² Taking a fast look at the image, the last girl on the right stands out: almost one head shorter, with darker skin and features that contrast notably with the lighter-skinned girls. Moreover her pose differs, as rather than seductively turned to the side

¹²¹ NaCo., "NACO BIO (ESPAÑOL)," 2005, accessed August 02, 2011, <http://www.myspace.com/nacoeshido/blog/49094162>.

Translation from Spanish: 'Término peyorativo utilizado por la clase media y alta mexicana para describir cosas y gente que sienten inferiores a ellos en cuanto a moda, gusto y nivel económico. Es comúnmente empleado como sinónimo de "pobre e ignorante", pero la naqués no conoce posición social o nivel educativo. La naqués se trata de sinceridad absoluta. [...] [L]o que no le gusta no tiene importancia. El naco es un estilo que va mas allá del kitsch, el camp o la cursilería exacerbada. Es espiritual en su aceptación del yo [...] Ser naco es más un estado de la mente, es no darle importancia a lo que otros piensan de uno, sin llegar a ser arrogante o cerrado. La naqués es ser uno mismo sin importar si está uno bien o no. Ultimadamente, ser naco se trata de ser uno mismo.'

¹²² Gabara, 2009, 291

while thrusting her chest and/or hip out, she is instead positioned in front view. The distinction between her and the rest of the girls is played out obviously. This image, rather than ‘break[ing] with the weight of [photographic] tradition’¹²³ of representing indigenous people to middle- and upper class – potential customers-, keeps it alive and perpetuates it. Moreover, it seems to emphasise that even if indigenous people are able to purchase the same product, they always will be different. It clearly shows a social and cultural resistance towards them.

As we have seen, even though the mask of naqui has slipped several times, the multiple meanings that build on derogative –racist– connotations continue to overlap. The máscara vs. máscara vs. máscara vs. máscara lucha – peasant Indian vs. vulgar kitsch vs. anyone-who-is-not rich vs. sincere, open, accepting– – is still going on. At times the scorning meanings are on the top but by hooking its elbow it is thrown to the ground, locking the poor and ignorant behind its back. It twists and embraces the tackiness, maintaining a grip on the other's apparent ignorance, all while repudiating even a modicum of condescending arrogance. As the lucha continues to increase in speed, our patronizing hero attempts continued attacks and defenses.



Fig. 30

Alongside the transformation of naqui, lucha libre’s audience is re-configured once again. As pointed out in the introduction, lucha libre re-entered higher classes as lighter-skinned, middle- and upper class people have appropriated naqui for their own benefit, putting on its masks without all the scorning consequences that come along with naqui if it is not a matter of choice. Today, the arenas generally have audiences mixed by ethnicity, gender, class and generation.

Lucha libre is announced in *Lonely Planet Mexico City* and right away after arriving at the airport one can buy a mask or a cape at El Santo’s

¹²³ Lomnitz-Adler, 2001, 113

paraphernalia shop to be well equipped for a visit to the arena.¹²⁴ At first sight it seems that the capture of a certain sector of lucha libre, with its two major enterprises, CMLL and Triple A, is a tool of commerce that targets and is appreciated by an all-inclusive audience. Since 2000, nine independent enterprises have been founded, mainly in the Mexico City Metropolitan Area and one for luchadoras in the city of Monterrey. Besides the luchas of Grupo Internauional Revolución (IWRG) and some of Desastre Total Ultraviolento (DTU), which are recorded for TVC Deportes, their luchas cannot be watched on television so people have to go to the arenas.¹²⁵ Even though lucha libre is a spectacle, I will suggest in the last chapter, that there are other dimensions to it and other contexts in which it still occurs that might cultivate a more engaged viewing. In this process of viewing, the “againsttogether” positioning of the luchadoris and the audience in the arena remains a central and important one.

As I have attempted to outline in this chapter, the homogenising, nationalist discourses of mexicanidad, mestizaje and indigenismo have serious undertones as their implicit reductions and the accompanying cultural assumptions obscure the complex reality of gender, class, race and ethnicity in Mexico and exclude differentiated identities. For Bartra, the myths of hegemonic articulations of national identity are not a reflection of popular consciousness but are rather ‘codified by intellectuals, the traces of which are, however, reproduced in society, creating an illusion of mass culture.’¹²⁶ In contrast to these myths, I argue that lucha libre allows a play of masks that complicates and has the potential to empower. In this sense, lucha libre has

¹²⁴ Daniel C. Schechter and Josephine Quintero, *Lonely Planet Mexico City* (Footscray, Melbourne. Oakland: Lonely Planet Publications, 2008): 5 and 192

¹²⁵ Desastre Total Ultraviolento (DTU) in 2007 <http://dtuextremos.blogspot.com/>, International Wrestling League (IWL) in 2010, Lucha Libre Extrema Aerea (EAW International) in 2009 <http://www.eaw.com.mx/inicio/inicio.php>, Lucha Libre Femenil (LLF) in 2000 <http://www.luchadoras.net>, Los Perros del Mal Producciones in 2008 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perros_del_Mal_Producciones, NWA Mexico in 2008, Super X Grand Prix Championship Wrestling <http://www.myspace.com/super-x> in 2004, Xtreme Latin American Wrestling (XLAW or X-LAW) in 2001 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xtreme_Latin_American_Wrestling
TVC Deportes was founded in 2007 and is owned by Productora y Comercializadora de Televisión (PCTV), a television network that broadcasts their own content and commercials on cable and satellite television in Mexico. <http://www.tvcnetworks.mx/>

¹²⁶ Bartra, 1987, 17

Translation from Spanish: ‘codificados por la intelectualidad, pero cuyas huellas se reproducen en la sociedad provocando el espejismo de una cultura popular de masas.’

been a constant wrestling over ‘what might be *Real* and necessary in history’ and in the present.¹²⁷ In the luchas the ‘urban Indians’¹²⁸ challenge the distinctions between high and low, foreign and national culture, and point to the contradictions between them. In this sense, the luchadoris in the arenas do not serve as figures upon whom homogenizing myths of national identity could phantasmatically be projected.

One of the possible reasons Grobet had to fight for years until she could finally publish her photographs in 2005 was because her images also counter these myths. Grobet says, ‘outside of Mexico my work on lucha libre has always been recognized, for instance the BBC in London made a documentary about me. But here [in Mexico] they cornered me as “naca”.’¹²⁹ As we have seen *naqui*’s connotations have changed and as such higher classes no longer distance themselves from it. They appropriate it for their own benefit, putting on its masks without all the scorning consequences that come along when *naqui* is not a matter of choice.



Fig. 31

Lucha libre, even though under huge pressure of social, cultural, economic and commercial demands and conditioning, carries within it a dissonance. It has always been less fixed and stable, fissured by difference and held together by contradictory desires and myths. Rather than fusing class, race

¹²⁷ Botey, 2005, 313

¹²⁸ cited in Gabara, 2010, 284

¹²⁹ cited in Miguel Angel Ceballos, “Cultura popular protagoniza ‘Al filo del ojo’,” 2005, accessed August, 01 2011, http://www2.eluniversal.com.mx/pls/impreso/noticia.html?id_notas=42206&tabla=cultura.

Translation from Spanish: ‘Fuera de México mi trabajo sobre la lucha libre siempre fue reconocido, incluso la BBC de Londres me hizo un documental, pero aquí no me bajaban de “naca”.’

and ethnicity into a homogenising representation, lucha libre allows for a variety of characters in their multidimensional complexities that wrestle “againsttogether”. The deployment of masks –their ability to display, conceal, substitute and transition at once– may open up a variety of possibilities for critiquing and transgressing norms. The various uses and appropriations of lucha libre masks and their actual and/or metaphorical implications, as discussed above, have found their ways into different fields and are applied to different degrees. I consider the mask as a mode of performance that I will pick up on in the following chapter in relation to gender. I will now focus on gender, discussing in greater detail the symbolic meanings and myths which fortify more specific conceptions of gender identity, relations, and power.



Fig. 32

2. Chapter 2: LA SEGUNDA (THE SECOND) LUCHA Conditions of Power? – Wrestling over Gender Roles

In the first chapter, I examined the concepts of mexicanidad, mestizaje and indigenismo in relation to the construction of a nation state and its race politics. In this chapter, I will first now take a closer look at the linked concept of machismo, and the figures of La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe. In doing so, I will explore aspects of the construction of gender and power in contemporary Mexico with particular emphasis on the way in which gender is articulated and woven into power formations. I will touch upon interrelated issues of lucha libre's imagery of gender and power. What imagery of power do the luchadoris evoke, and which gender relations are infused? Do the bodies of luchadoris disrupt the normative roles assigned to men and women thus destabilizing and even sometimes threatening dominant and normative codes? Do luchadoras and exóticos actively sustain relations in which they are seemingly subordinated? Or do they challenge them?



Fig. 33

Many of the people to whom I spoke about their experiences with lucha libre consider it to be something that is centrally about masculinity – an ovation to machismo.¹ In contrast to the concepts of mexicanidad, mestizaje and indigenismo, I have encountered the term machismo many times in my conversations with the luchadoris. In this chapter, I argue that machismo, as a term that essentially reflects patriarchy, might actually be understood as one of the crucial myths in the construction of masculinity. In the second section of this chapter, I will discuss how luchadoras entered the initially masculine gendered space of lucha libre. By taking a closer look at the figures of La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche I will explore how they also reflect an ambiguity attached to what it means to be a woman and thus by implication, a man. While exploring the luchadoras' roles in the arena, I will look at what might be at stake in psychoanalyst Joan

¹ Levi (2008, 138) received a similar explanation from an Ecuadorian sociologist who by then had lived for the previous six years in Mexico City and with whom she went to her first lucha libre event.

Riviere's *Womanliness as a Masquerade* and Judith 'Jack' Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*.



Fig. 34

Novo celebrated the luchadoris' physical intimacy and focused on the sensuality of physical contact which drew him into the luchas at the end of the 1930s:

[D]uring the delicious process [of a lucha ...] what brilliant improvisations we see! How ululating, Greek spectators in fabric sweaters, when [the luchadori] flips in the air like a black demon and grabs, with the long locks of his legs, the neck of his coward rival, sheltered outside the ropes, to get him through them and to deposit him on the canvas, as fat as he may be, like a graceful crane transporting a heavy package from a dock into a ship.²

Novo's writing shows lucha libre to be saturated with same-sex desire, something I will explore further in the last section of this chapter when I discuss the complex role of los exóticos, today generally understood to be homosexuals. Attempting to link la loca (effeminate homosexuals) in the popular ficheras film subgenre of the 1970s and early 1980s with los exóticos, I will examine their representations in the subgenre and the ring as to discuss their different agencies. Moreover, I will demonstrate how these representations and practices reify the processes of construction of realities

² Novo, 1964, 600

Translation from Spanish: '[D]urante el proceso delicioso [de la lucha] [...] - ¡qué improvisaciones brillantes no presenciamos! ¡Cómo ululamos, espectadores griegos con sweater tejido, cuando Back Guzmán se lanza al aire igual que un demonio negro y coge con las pinzas largas de sus piernas el pescuezo de su cobarde rival, guarecido fuera de las cuerdas, para sacarlo por ellas y depositarlo en la lona cuan gordo es, como una grúa airosa que transporta del muelle al barco un bulto pesado!'

As such it does not come as a surprise that the second major Gay porn made in Mexico, after *Sexxcuatro* in 2001 by the same director under the name Summer Gandolf takes place in the field of lucha libre: *La putiza*, Jorge Diestra, 2004.

and the conditions of power at work in these processes with the focus of disrupting, challenging, destabilizing, and subverting the rigid binary and heteronormative gender orders.³ I set out to do so through the proposed *Strategie der VerUneindeutigung* (queer strategy of equivocation) suggested by the philosopher and cultural theorist Antke Engle which favours representations and practices that resist amongst other things, being pinned down to a single meaning.

2.1 Section 1: LA PRIMERA CAÍDA – THE FIRST FALL The Luchadores’ Incoherent Luchas: Machismo Vs. Nationalism Vs. Masculinities

Yo soy mexicano, mi tierra es bravía,
palabra de macho que no hay
otra tierra más linda
y más brava, que la tierra mía
Yo soy mexicano y a orgullo lo tengo

I am Mexican, my land is fierce,
I give you my word as a macho
That there is no other land
Lovelier and more fierce than mine.
I am Mexican and proud of it

[...]

[...]

Yo soy mexicano, de naiden me fío
y como Cuauhtémoc cuando estoy
sufriendo, antes que rajarme,
me aguanto y me río

I am Mexican, I trust no one
and like Cuauhtémoc, when I am
suffering I laugh and bear it,
before I give in.

[...]

[...]

The lyrics of *Yo soy mexicano*, sung by Jorge Negrete in the film *El peñón de las ánimas* (*Lover’s Leap*, 1942, directed by Miguel Zacarías), exemplify the moment when the mutual, reciprocal identification of el macho and the nation-state operated apparently quite smoothly. It was during Mexican cinema’s Golden Age that constituted a coupling of machismo and nationalism with stars as Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, Pedro Amadoriz, amongst others. These stars portrayed machismo as a specifically Mexican cultural ideal of male behaviour. As Ramírez Berg points out: ‘If there is a national male

³ Antke Engel, *Wider die Eindeutigkeit. Sexualität und Geschlecht im Fokus Queerer Politik der Repräsentation* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2002)

symbol in Mexico, it is the nation-state itself.’⁴ Moreover he argues that machismo is the name of the mutual agreement between the patriarchal state and the individual men. According to Monsiváis the official representation of el macho is a depoliticised revolutionary:

Post mortem, Pancho Villa is the emblem of machismo. Exaggerated, some of his personality traits consist of such ‘social use’ of him as figure, that it erases or distorts his talent as a strategist, his class solidarity, the energy of his social anger, and only draws attention to a celebration of the culture of violence. Journalism, narrative and film limit again and again the essence of his character: familiarity with death, instinct without thought, feudal attraction to women. The avenging claims that made it possible in the first place disappear from the character, his correspondence with its time are left out, and becomes isolated as a sign of barbarism, the male of the Revolution.⁵

The way Pancho Villa has been perpetually reduced –in cinema and other popular representations– to a caricature, has effectively created a monolithic, superficial, hegemonic and normative machismo. The anthropologists Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne contend however, that ‘we must explore how various masculinities are defined and redefined in social interaction.’⁶

Hegemonic and normative concepts about what it means to be a man in specific contexts, such as machismo in Mexico, are intertwined with and have influences upon these masculinities that are enacted and performed both consistently and inconsistently. I intend to understand machismo in the particular setting of Mexico and lucha libre by working with the introductory phrases accompanying the luchadores when they enter the arena.⁷ In the following section, I will take a closer look at the introductory phrases of the

⁴ Ramírez Berg, 1992, 106f

⁵ Carlos Monsiváis, 1981, “Mexicanerías: ¿Pero hubo alguna vez once mil machos?” in *Escenas de pudor y liviandad* (México D.F.: Delbolsillo, 2004), 111

Translation from Spanish: ‘Post mortem, Pancho Villa es el emblema del machismo. Agigantados, algunos rasgos de su personalidad consienten tal ‘empleo social’ de la figura, que borra o distorsiona su talento de estratega, sus razones de clase, la energía de su rencor social, e iluminan sólo la exaltación de la cultura de la violencia. El periodismo, la narrativa y el cine delimitan una y otra vez la esencia del personaje: familiaridad con la muerte, instinto sin contención, avidez feudal por las mujeres. Desaparece del personaje la exigencia reivindicadora que lo hizo posible, se omiten sus correspondencias con la época, y se le aísla como signo de barbarie, el Macho de la Revolución.’

⁶ Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne, Introduction to *Dislocating Masculinity. Comparative Ethnographies*, (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), 3

⁷ Each luchador is accompanied by introductory words, theme songs and sometimes also by an introductory video.

luchadores Héctor Garza, Latin Lover, La Máscara and Marco Corleone. I argue that these phrases touch upon several issues that have been discussed in relation to the terms macho and machismo. Thinking of Monsiváis' assumptions on Pacho Villa's imagery as being reduced to merely celebrating violence. I ask: could these luchadores also be understood as depoliticised machos? Do they challenge machismo as a hegemonic and normative masculinity?



Fig. 35

At first glance some of the luchadores' introductory words can be read within the realms that Monsiváis sets up for Pancho Villa: the luchadores 'only draw attention to a celebration of the culture of violence' and the 'familiarity with death, instinct without thought, feudal attraction to women.'⁸ Moreover, they offer points of entry, such as the city/country/land, traditions, religion and their relationships to the public and to the ladies in particular, that are significant for understanding the meaning of macho. Nevertheless, taking a closer look, these words offer a more complex representation. All of the luchadores are indirectly or directly linked to *lucha libre* and their loyalty to it, while each one displays particular characteristics:

Héctor Garza made his debut in 1992. He has long dark hair and wrestles without a mask in tiny tight hot-pants. His introductory words make clear that it is his behaviour in the ring that wins the heart of ladies:

He is a man with a seductive gaze, for sure, a total macho in the ring, before you the bodily presence of the seductive little angel Hééééctooooo Gaaaarzzaaa. He behaves like a total gentleman with the ladies.⁹

This description emphasises that Héctor Garza is a total macho in the ring. The 1,80 meter tall luchador is mockingly called a little angel or might it be

⁸ Monsiváis, 1981, 111

⁹ Nina Höchtl, *EXPLOSIVO PROGRAMA DE TITANES Y TITÁNIDES*, 27 mins, (2010) Sound Installation
Translation from Spanish: Es un hombre de mirada seductora, eso sí, todo un macho dentro de los encordados, ante ustedes la humanidad del querubín seductor Héééééctooooo Gaaaarzzaaa. Comportándose como todo un caballero con las damas.

that the 'total macho' is meant as a parody? I am thus left to wonder what he embodies outside the ring and what it means to be a total macho rather than just a macho.

The political scientist Evelyn P. Stevens claims that '[t]he chief characteristics of [the cult of virility –machismo–] are exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male-to-male interpersonal relationships and arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to female relationships.'¹⁰ Through commenting in the introductory phrases that Héctor Garza is a total gentleman with the ladies, it seems possible to apply the performative repertoire of aggressiveness and intransigence in the ring but also to treat women in a respectful manner without taking advantage of them. This contradicts Stevens' characterisation of male-to-female relationships as full of 'arrogance and sexual aggression.'¹¹ In this sense, one characteristic that might be found in relationships between men, and might be considered a "successful" way of settling difference and conflicts, does not necessarily lead to an arrogant and sexually aggressive way of dealing with women.

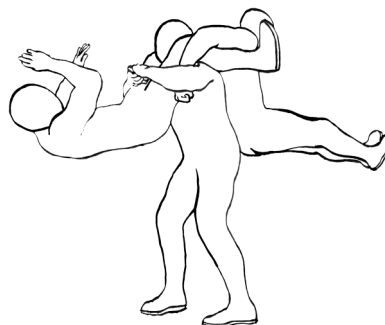


Fig. 36

The luchador La Máscara, who had his debut in 2000, uses a golden-black mask and shows his torso. He is introduced as a heartbreaker, leaving the audience to wonder whose hearts he actually breaks:

A young gladiator who has made a commitment to lucha libre to carry on a family tradition. He always defends himself to emerge

¹⁰ cited in Matthew C. Gutmann, *The Meaning of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), 223

¹¹ *Ibid.*

victorious in each one of his matches... he has competed all over.
The heartbreaker, here with you Laaaaa Máaascaraa¹²

La Máscara, part of the famous luchadoris family Los Brazos, carries on the family tradition of lucha libre. He breaks hearts and impresses his audience with his talent as a luchador, applying a variety of precise moves. One of these moves is the spectacular plancha suicida (suicidal dive), a jump from the ring apron, or the turnbuckles, to the outside of the ring so as to land on the opponent – in what could be argued as a ‘familiarity with death’.¹³ As such, he takes quite some risk to not get seriously injured –an ‘instinct without thought’¹⁴ – while still breaking the audience’s heart.

Marco Corleone, a luchador from the U.S.A., but who claims to be from Italy, had his debut in Mexico in 2006. He is almost 2 meters tall, has short blond hair and wrestles without a mask but in hot-pants. According to his introductory words, it was through his choice to be part of lucha libre that he became the idol of Mexico, loved by women and respected by enemies:

Here comes the bambino. A man 2 meters tall. He could succeed in any sport but he has chosen lucha libre in which he is the idol of Mexico. Women love him and enemies respect him. Here with you the golden bambino Marco Corleone the bambino.¹⁵

The introduction of Marco Corleone says something about contemporary Mexico. It seems that if one makes the “right” choices –in this case the choice to work in the field of lucha libre– applies the “right” behaviour, with machismo as one of these options, it is possible to fit in, in the “right” way. It is possible for a non-Mexican to become an idol in Mexico.

¹² Höchtl, 2010

Translation from Spanish: ‘Joven gladiador que ha adquirido un compromiso con la lucha libre para seguir con una tradición familiar. Siempre defendiéndose para salir victorioso de cada uno de sus encuentros... ha competido en todos lados. El rompe corazones, con ustedes Laaaaa Máaascaraa.’

¹³ Carlos Monsiváis, 1981,111

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Höchtl, 2010

Translation from Spanish: ‘Aquí llega el bambino. Un hombre con dos metros de estatura. Podría participar en cualquier deporte y triunfar pero él eligió la lucha libre en la que es el el ídolo de México. Las mujeres lo aman y los enemigos lo respetan. Con ustedes el bambino de oro Marco Corleone el bambino.’

Latin Lover had his debut in 1992. He has long dark hair and wrestles without a mask but in red tight pants that show a broken white heart in front of his genitals:

The public was already waiting for him. The man who loves to dance and who also loves lucha libre. Brother, I don't remember the show in Orizaba and that is why we want to see him. He is from Monterrey, Nuevo León. The public asks him to dance in the ring and he doesn't hesitate: Latiiiiin Loveeeeeer.¹⁶

He loves lucha libre as much as dancing. This seems to be an opposition but I argue that lucha libre and dancing are actually closely related. Both are based on a choreography that allows for an improvisation, be it on the dance floor or in the ring. I wonder however, if his passion for dancing would be as much cherished if his loyalty for lucha libre was not mentioned in the same sentence? In his study on life and violence in rural Mexico, the anthropologist James B. Greenberg, pointed out that there are also machos with non-confrontational, nonaggressive behavior.¹⁷ Latin Lover is known and loved for his dancing. This might be considered as being part of a macho's non-confrontational and nonaggressive manners. Nonetheless, Latin Lover has to prove that he is not only able to dance, but also to fight with all that it takes to win.



Fig. 37

Even if two of the introductory words (Héctor Garza and Marco Corleone) make a direct link to women, it is left open what their involvements are and if they are attracted to women or not. The audience is addressed to find either pleasure or objection in watching their different representations of masculinity. In this sense, their introductory words point out to what the anthropologist

¹⁶ Ibid.

Translation from Spanish: 'El público lo estaba esperando. El hombre que ama el baile y que también ama la lucha libre. Hijo, yo no me acuerdo de esta función en Orizaba y es por eso que tenemos esas ganas de verlo. Es de Monterrey, Nuevo León. El público le pide que baile en el cuadrilátero y él no se hace del rogar: Latiiiiin Loveeeeeer.'

¹⁷ James B. Greenberg, *Blood ties: life and violence in rural México*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989) Greenberg describes an instance in which the protagonist Don Fortino 'was being very macho, in a nonconfrontational, almost womanly manner.' (cited in Gutmann, 1996, 223)

Matthew Gutmann clarifies in his study *The Meaning of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*, that the terms macho and machismo have been used in contradictory ways and as such, they reveal not only a diversity of views regarding the substance of the terms, but also widely disparate conjectures as to the origins of the words and their meanings.¹⁸ Steven's claim that machismo is 'the cult of virility' whose main characteristics 'are exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male-to-male interpersonal relationships'¹⁹ erases a lot of the variations and subtleties that inform this complex term – orientation, being, appearance, position and mannerism, amongst others.

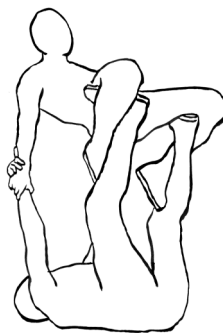


Fig. 38

The luchadores' performative acts destabilize the assumption that the macho is there to celebrate violence.²⁰ In contrast to Pancho Villa's imagery, I propose that the luchadores do not represent depoliticised machos as their talent as luchadores wrestling "againsttogether", their solidarity with and within lucha libre, their energy and, importantly, their collaboration with the audience takes an active role in the construction of the luchas. In the practice of lucha libre, luchadores operate according to and perform a variety of masculinities. They construct and contest them in shifting and contingent male-to-male luchas applying an "againsttogether". Exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence are part of their performative repertoires, however, I would argue that through their exaggerations of machismo, the luchadores playfully,

¹⁸ Gutmann, 1996

¹⁹ cited in *Ibid.*, 223

²⁰ Moreover, elderly luchadores, for example El Dandy (born 1962), Fuerza Guerrera (born 1953), El Negro Navarro (born 1957), Solar I (born 1956), apply different performative acts than their younger colleagues: such as honour, respect, the celebration of a great llave even when used by the luchador from the opposing team – the perfection of an "againsttogether" focusing on balance and timing.

wittily, and through parody show the audience that machismo is a construction. Repetitions play an important part in this construction as they simultaneously make machismo recognizable and parodic and exaggerated alterations visible. Butler postulates in *Gender Trouble: Feminism And The Subversion Of Identity*:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow, rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*.²¹

I argue that the characteristics attributed to representations and imagery of Pancho Villa and the luchadores –and also to el macho generally– can be understood, as a ‘*stylized repetition*’ in an exterior space and that these can be traced in the luchadores’ introductory phrases, theme songs, and public interviews.²²

2.1.1 Gender as Acts of Repetition Vs. Imitation

Before I had spent time in Mexico, my understanding of macho was a limited one: for me, a macho had an attitude of being overtly masculine and chauvinist, believing and acting out the supposed superiority of his own gender. Soon I realized that the use of the term macho is more complicated as it allows a variety of readings that are already hinted at in the Nahuatl word macho.²³ Macho in Nahuatl means, translated to Spanish, *ejemplar*; that is to say, in English, one that is worthy of imitation; an original, prototype, representative norm; each one of the individuals of a species or genus. The *Diccionario de la lengua náhuatl o mexicana* (Dictionary of the Nahuatl or Mexican language) defines macho as the following: distinguished, illustrious, etcetera. As a passive voice of *Mati*: *uel macho ó nouian macho*, evident, well

²¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, London: Routledge, 1990), 140

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Nahuatl is a group of related languages and dialects of the Nahuan branch of the Uto-Aztecan language family. Altogether they are spoken by approximately 1.5 million Nahua people, most of whom live in Central Mexico. All Nahuan languages are indigenous to Mesoamerica.

known, notorious; *qualli ipam macho*, he is good, well behaved, etc.²⁴ What I find especially interesting here is the link between gender and repetition and between macho and imitation. I wonder what then is the difference between imitation and repetition?

If I consider imitation as the act of resembling, of expression, and the presentation of the self, this act can also be done unconsciously. Nevertheless, repetition is an act of saying, making, doing, going through experiencing, or performing something again (and again). One repeats that which one had already defined and observed before. These acts can thus be understood as conscious. The difference between repetition and imitation lies in the state of consciousness of the one who repeats or imitates. That is to say that gender, while not a rigid category, behaves as one through its reiteration. Gender is reified through repetition and imitation. This form of performance might be compared to a show, as we have seen through the example of the macho, that runs decade after decade. During this show masking plays a significant role. The mask of gender makes gender admissible, visible, even photogenic. The act of masking equips the performing self, it keeps the mask alive to be donned again and again, to be recognizable. Nevertheless, as discussed in the first chapter, masks are able to display, conceal, substitute and transition at once. Hence, they are able to introduce twists, changes and incoherencies – to slip and to yet reveal another mask.



Fig. 39

²⁴ Rémi Siméon, *Diccionario de la lengua náhuatl o mexicana* (México: Siglo XXI Editores, 2004), 246 and 258

Macho and machismo assume shifting meanings based on the repeater and imitator, based on the speaker as much as on the person described. It is important to point out that as much as el macho is worthy of imitation, he also 'has doubts'.²⁵ Anzaldúa emphasises the fact that the adapted machismo of today leads to a 'false machismo which leads him to put down women and even to brutalize them.'²⁶ This 'false machismo'²⁷ can be considered a hegemonic and normative masculinity that has dominance not just over women, but also over minority masculinities. As pointed out, depending on who does the acts of repetition and imitation, the macho is deconstructed and reconstructed, challenged and reified simultaneously. The outcome of masculinity practices within lucha libre is neither straightforward nor predictable. As there are a variety of masculinities at stake and on display in lucha libre, I argue that lucha libre cannot simply be read as an instance of machismo nor through a hegemonic and normative notion of macho.

As we have seen in this section, the myths of machismo are either embedded in real historical characters or in stereotypical heroes that complement and build upon each other. What are the myths that are associated with women and that might have served women for their acts of repetition and imitation, even though they may as well have produced unintended effects? Roger Bartra's term "Chingadalupe" addresses the duality of La Virgen de Guadalupe and la Malinche in the context of Mexican nationalism as 'an ideal imagery that the Mexican macho should form about their partner, who should fornicate with uninhibited enjoyment, at the same time, be virginal and consoling.'²⁸ Both, La Virgen de Guadalupe and la Malinche, according to Bartra, are two models of a single myth of national origins: the virginal, suffering brown Virgen de Guadalupe, protector of the nation Mexico and the Empress of the Americas, and La Malinche also known as La Chingada, the fucked or violated mother of the mestizis. Are luchadoras able to challenge these myths? How did they enter the initially masculine gendered space of the

²⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, 1987, *Borderlands: the new mestiza = La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 105

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Bartra, 1987, 222

luchas? Do they represent powerful and public forms of femininity and/or masculinity?

2.2 Section 2: LA SEGUNDA CAÍDA – THE SECOND FALL La Múltiple Lucha (The Multiple Struggle) of Luchadoras

In 1935, two years after *lucha libre*'s debut, the businessman Frank Moser decided to bring women wrestlers to Mexico after he had seen them in a ring in Chicago. Until then, women wrestlers were unknown to the audience in Mexico and the arrival of foreign women caused simultaneous puzzlement and curiosity. According to Rubenstein, in the 1920s, relatively few Mexican women participated in athletic activities except for dancing.²⁹ Even though masses of women and men were mobilized in demonstrations of group gymnastics and many more were learning folk dances, volleyball and basketball, through the efforts of the revolutionary Ministry of Education, images of women athletes, represented members of a rarified elite: the country-club set.³⁰ The women wrestlers were therefore very unlikely to measure up to these images.



Fig. 40

The first *lucha* with *luchadoras*, hosted at Arena Mexico, took place on Friday, July 12, 1935. A day later on Saturday, July 13, 1935, Carlos Vera, editor of the sport's newspaper *La Afición*, titled one of his articles: 'Mediocre was the display that the *luchadoras* gave in their debut.'³¹

Nevertheless, the *luchadoras* did two more programs on July 19 and July 24, 1935, with a *luchadora* from Mexico, Natalia

Vázquez, who had her debut that night. The programs were composed of women and men wrestlers from Canada, France, Germany,

²⁹ Anne Rubenstein, "The War on *Las Pelonas*: Modern Women and Their Enemies, Mexico City, 1924," in *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico*, ed. Jocelyn Olcott and Mary Kay Vaughan (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 62-63

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ cited in Hernández Aguilar, Norma Irene, "Damas del cuadrilátero. Reportaje sobre la *lucha libre* femenil en México," (MA Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2009), 28
Translation from Spanish: 'Mediocre fue la exhibición que dieron en su debut las *luchadoras*.'

Ireland, Italy, Mexico and the U.S.A. The women wrestled amongst each other but also with other men. A few days later, on Thursday, August 1, 1935, *La Afición* posted in an article on an extra function: 'Yesterday, fortunately, as it was shown not to be a spectacle for Mexico, the very short season of women's luchas ended at the Arena Mexico.'³²

This statement proved to be untrue as lucha femenil (female wrestling), fortunately, did not come to an end. In 1936, the wrestler Billy Wolfe decided to train and promote women wrestlers in the U.S.A. Among those who joined their ranks was Mildred Burke, who later became not only world champion but also the wife of Billy Wolfe. In 1942 and 1945, this group, led by Mildred Burke, visited Mexico. Seven years later, in 1952, on behalf of CMLL, the group led by Mildred Burke returned to wrestle sporadically at Arena Coliseo and Arena México. By then, the first generation of Mexican luchadoras, among them Irma González and La Dama Enmascarada, was about to make a breakthrough and win the hearts of their audience. By the late 1950s, Mildred Burke began to bring groups from the U.S.A. and from Mexico to wrestle in Japan. Despite all these efforts though, luchadoras were prohibited from wrestling in Mexico City from 1957 throughout 1986. However, on a national level, women kept wrestling. According to González, they would feature in star positions at the end of a lucha night, and some promoters even organized all-women events.



Fig. 41

Without a doubt, lucha femenil did not have an easy start in Mexico. It took

³² Ibid., 32

Translation from Spanish: 'Ayer, afortunadamente, pues se demostró que no era espectáculo para México, terminó en la Arena México la cortísima temporada de luchas de mujeres.'

some years until the promoters, the press, and the audience accepted, appreciated and supported luchadoras and considered them to be serious and professional athletes. In the field of lucha libre, what was considered to be appropriate and what was not for the role of women, what was expected and accepted and what not, was in question. Myths, according to Anzaldúa, 'are used against women and against certain races to control, regulate and manipulate [what it means to be a woman]'.³³ As the figures of La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe 'have been written from a male patriarchal perspective',³⁴ I will take a closer look at them in the following section to discuss on the one hand how they have conditioned femininity and on the other hand how these figures have been reclaimed, rearticulated, revised, reinterpreted, reconceptualized, refigured and repositioned through acts of repetition and imitation as sets of words, speech acts, and imagery as well as gestures, behaviors and repertoires.

2.2.1 Tackling the “Againsttogether” of the Figures La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe

The role of women in Mexico and their representations have been greatly influenced by and embedded in the figures of la Malinche and la Virgen de Guadalupe. As discussed in the first section, machismo has been closely linked to the construction of national identity, but the repetitions of the macho may point towards the incoherence within this normative myth of masculinity. 'There are certain myths,' Anzaldúa states, '—the stories of Coatlicue, la Llorona, la Chingada, la Virgen de Guadalupe, and Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess— that I associate with women.'³⁵ Anzaldúa reclaims and reinvents these prominent women cultural figures to constantly shift identity formations, and offers a different reading of the virgin/whore —la Virgen de Guadalupe (the virgin or mother and therefore guardian of the Latin Americans) and La Malinche (the prostitute and/or traitor)— dyad. In the words of Anzaldúa:

³³ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Interviews / Entrevistas / Gloria Anzaldúa*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 219

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

La gente Chicana tiene tres madres. All three are mediators: Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, la Chingada (Malinche), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and la Llorona, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two. Ambiguity surrounds the symbols of these three “Our mothers”.³⁶

On the one hand, la Malinche has evolved from a historical figure of the Conquest in Mexico to a symbol of all those who have allied themselves with foreigners against their own country and its native values and traditions – pejoratively referred to as malinchismo. On the other hand, la Malinche is regarded as the symbolic mother of the mestizis.



Fig. 42

Malinal(li) Tenepal, Malintzín, la Malinche or (Doña) Marina (c. 1496 or c. 1505 – c. 1529, some sources give 1550-1551) ‘has become known as la Chingada-the fucked one.’³⁷

The figure has several different names: at birth she was named Malinalli or Malinal, after the Goddess of Grass, on whose name-day she was born. Later her family added the name Tenepal which means ‘one who speaks much and with liveliness.’³⁸; Marina, the Christian name she was baptized with by the Spaniards; Doña Marina, as the conquistador and chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo refers to her, using the title Doña (Lady) to indicate her purported noble origin and her importance in the conquest; Malintzin, as the indigenous accounts refer to both Marina and the conquistador Hernan Cortés, because he spoke through her, using respectfully the ending “tzin”.³⁹ One possible reading of her name as Mālin-tzin can be translated as “Noble Prisoner/Captive” or “Marina's Lord” (a reasonable possibility as she was given to Hernán Cortés, her allegedly noble origin and her relationship to the

³⁶ Anzaldúa, 2007, 52/53

³⁷ Anzaldúa, 2007, 44

³⁸ Sandra Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 2

³⁹ Bernal Díaz del Castillo. 1632. *The Conquest of New Spain* (London: The Folio, 1963), 150

Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1492 – 1585) is known for his account of the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards under Hernán Cortés (1485 – 1547) who led the conquest (1485 – 1547) and brought large portions of mainland Mexico under rule of the King of Castile (Spain).

Cortés expedition); la Malinche, as she is commonly known today, was a Spanish approximation of Mālin-tzin, and la Chinganda, what she became, especially after the Mexican Revolution.



Fig. 43

As all these names imply, la Malinche is a figure of multiple interpretations and representations, which permeate historical, cultural, and social dimensions, her reputation has been altered over the years as social and political perspectives changed throughout time – especially after the Mexican Revolution, when she was portrayed in dramas, novels, and paintings as an evil or scheming temptress.⁴⁰ As Anzaldúa points out, la Malinche's legacy is one of mixed myths. Since she is also referred to as la Chingada, she stands for the betrayal of one's own people or culture: the '[w]hore, prostitute, the woman who sold out her people to the Spaniards [which] are epithets [...] spit out with contempt.'⁴¹ La Chingada has served as a scapegoat. Nevertheless, Anzaldúa points out that:

The worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer. We, indias and mestizas, police the Indian in us, brutalize and condemn her. Male culture has done a good job on us. [...] Not me sold out my people, but they me. Because of the color of my skin they betrayed me.⁴²

The mythical figure of Guadalupe, too, has been manipulated, co-opted and tamed over the centuries as much as the figure of la Malinche has served different ideological, social and political movements for their diverse purposes.

⁴⁰ Cypess, 1991, 12-13

⁴¹ Anzaldúa, 2007, 44

⁴² Ibid.

According to popular accounts even though there are various interpretations of the authenticity of Guadalupe's apparition, the brown-skinned virgin appeared to the recently converted Nahua and now saint Juan Diego (1474 - 1548) on the hill of Tepeyac, an ancient pilgrimage site in Central Mexico dedicated to the sacred earth mother, Tonantzin, from December 9 through 12, 1531, a decade after the conquest.



Fig. 44

Anzaldúa points out that 'Guadalupe has been used by the Church to mete out institutionalized oppression: to placate the Indians and Mexicanos and Chicanos.'⁴³ According to Anzaldúa, Guadalupe is the direct descendent of a lineage of powerful Mexican women deities – Coatlicue, Cihuacoatl and Tonantzin. Anzaldúa thus strives at restoring the wholeness of Guadalupe destroyed by the dualities ingrained in patriarchal culture. Like Guadalupe, Coatlicue, Cihuacoatl and Tonantzin were Mexican goddesses and, as such, they were considered manifestations of mother Earth. These women were goddesses of war and birth; they embodied heavenly and underworld powers and they incarnated the qualities of loving and nurturing motherhood as much as the sexuality and underworld slyness of the serpent and the courage of warriors. Hence, the completeness of these women deities lay in that they synthesized the male and female principles as well as those of good and evil. Furthermore, since they belonged in equal measure to heaven, the underworld and the world of human beings, these goddesses were mediators between them. 'In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted –

⁴³ Ibid., 52-53

Guadalupe to make us docile and enduring, la Chingada to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and la Llorona to make us long-suffering people,' Anzaldúa states and adds that '[t]his obscuring has encouraged the virgin/puta (whore) dichotomy.'⁴⁴

Without a doubt, the choices of chaste virgin, weeping woman/mother and treacherous whore, that have been associated with these complex, multilayered and malleable figures, are rather limited and unsatisfactory. The varied and often contradictory meanings and functions allotted to la Malinche and Guadalupe reflect the multiethnic, socially stratified nature of a society in which distinct social and political groups have applied them to represent their particular needs and interests. Images of women were generally long restricted to either the stereotypically submissive wife and/or mother, or to the demonized fallen woman. However, many artists, writers, theorist and activists have configured la Malinche and Guadalupe as powerful icons of Mexican and Chicana resistance to cultural and patriarchal domination.⁴⁵ Through the act of reclamation, rearticulation, revision, reinterpretation, reconceptualization, refiguration and repositioning of la Malinche and Guadalupe, the artists not only offer critique and deconstruction but new readings and images. The Chicana poet Inés Hernández, for example, argues that Chicana writers and artists are all daughters of la Malinche as they 'have accepted their role as "tongues" and demanded that their voices be heard.'⁴⁶ Since at least the 1970s, a line of feminist and artistic reclamations has made Guadalupe's socio-political legacies and functions visible; and/or sexualized and/or queered her image.⁴⁷ The work of activist artist Alma López is inscribed in this line.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ For example alongside Gloria E. Anzaldúa, the writers Sabine Berman, Rosario Castellanos, Ana Castillos Sandra Cisneros, Deniz Chávez, Elena Garro, Margo Glantz, the artists Maris Bustamante, Ester Hernández, Alma López, Yolanda M. López, Monica Mayer, Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe, the theorists Adelaida del Castillo, Norma Alarcón, Cherríe L. Moraga, Deena González and the activists of *Marcha Lésbica* (Lesbian March) 2006 in Mexico City, to name but a few.

⁴⁶ Inés Hernández, "An Open Letter to Chicanas: On the Power and Politics of Origin," in *Without Discovery: A Native Response to Columbus*, ed. Ray Gonzales (Seattle: Broken Moon Publishers, 1992), 160

⁴⁷ See Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Alma López, *Our Lady Of Controversy: Alma López's Irreverent Apparition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011)



Fig. 45

The image above (Fig. 45), titled *Lupe and Sirena in Love* from 1999 by Alma López, shows one of the many images of Guadalupe that can be found at almost any corner in Mexico and/or where Chicanos live in the U.S.A. This one is on the border wall that divides Mexico and the U.S.A. Superimposed on top of it is the year of the signing of the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo: 1848.⁴⁸ This treaty led to the actions of the migra (Chicano slang for the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, INS) that is also part of this digital collage – a man is being chased by one of the migra agents. In this image Guadalupe is not suffering but is actually enjoying herself. She gently and lovingly holds Sirena, the mermaid with slightly lighter skin, caressing her buttocks and one of her breasts. Guadalupe's brown body is desired and she desires, even seduces the mermaid's slightly lighter-tanned body. Like Guadalupe, Sirena is a virgin because she has no legs to part. Although both are immune to penetration and consequently becoming *las chingadas*, they, as mythological figures, are particularly open to same-sex sensual pleasures.⁴⁹ In the image, the queer couple is on top of the Viceroy Butterfly. This butterfly looks all too like the famous Monarch Butterfly, which is poisonous to its predators.⁵⁰ The

⁴⁸ The Tránsito de Guadalupe-Hidalgo is the so-called peace treaty that was largely dictated by the United States to the interim government of a militarily occupied Mexico City, that ended the Mexican-American War (1846 – 48) on February 2, 1848. With the defeat of its army and the fall of the capital, Mexico surrendered to the United States and entered into negotiations to end the war. The land that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo brought into the United States became, between 1850 and 1912, all or part of ten states: California (1850), Nevada (1864), Utah (1896), Arizona (1912), and the entire state of Texas (1845) that then included part of Kansas (1861), Colorado (1876), Wyoming (1890), Oklahoma (1907), and New Mexico (1912). The southern parts of New Mexico and Arizona were peacefully purchased under Gadsden Purchase, which was carried out in 1853.

⁴⁹ Thanks to Charles Fairbanks for pointing out this particular openness!

⁵⁰ Luz Calvo, *Art Comes for the Archbishop: The Semiotics of Contemporary Chicana Feminism and the Work of*

harmless Viceroy Butterfly resembles the latter in order to more likely survive. López explains: ‘The Viceroy pretends to be something that it is not just to be able to exist. For me, the Viceroy mirrors parallel and intersecting histories of being different or “other” even within our own communities.’⁵¹ Moreover, the Viceroy Butterfly has a range from central Mexico along the Cascade Range and Sierra Nevada mountains into the Northwest Territories in Canada. Behind Guadalupe and Sirena unfolds the cityscape of Los Angeles, and at the foot of it people demonstrate marching towards the sea. It is thus not possible to divide Guadalupe and Sirena’s queer desire from its racial, ethnical and cultural context that takes place in transnational formations. Here and there, unconscious and conscious, past and present, now and then, can all take place simultaneously.⁵²

The imagery of la Malinche and Guadalupe has been reconfigured again and again in an attempt to subvert and resist the myths imposed on femininity. New readings and images have been offered of these complex and polyvalent figures to demand that voices are heard – to practice racial, ethnic and transnational solidarity, to defend and fight for civil rights, to open up feminist and queer potential. What about the imagery of luchadoras? How do luchadoras negotiate femininity in the ring? Do they emphasize aspects of ambiguity and complexity in gender performativity, relations and desire?

2.2.2 Womanliness As Masquerade Vs. Wrestling Luchadoras Vs. Female Masculinity

Irma González told me in a conversation in 2011 that throughout the 1950s, luchadoras did not have access to regular trainers, and once working they often suffered harassment from their male colleagues. As they shared the changing rooms with fellow luchadores they were even more vulnerably

Alma López (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 107

⁵¹ cited in *Ibid.*

⁵² *Lupe and Sirena in Love* is part of several collages on La Virgen de Guadalupe by Alma López realized between 1998 and 2008. Especially her first one *Our Lady* (1998) caused demonstrations, community meetings and letters to the Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA) where it was shown in 2000 in Santa Fe, New Mexico. More see Gaspar de Alba and López, 2011

exposed to their violent discrimination and exclusion and to acts like the vandalizing of their outfits or the nailing of their boots to the floor, so as to prevent them from entering the arena. Before the 1980s, it was not even considered important for women to have their own changing rooms where, before a *lucha* they could feel unconstrained in their being and mobility rather than subordinated. *Luchadoras* had to fend off threatening and overtly sexual forms of harassment, but once in a while they also had promoters who stood up for them as they filled the arenas. González explained:

The people from the villages made celebrities out of Chabe [Chabela] and me. As we had no television or support from big business, we had to win the public over at each place so they would go see us. We were among the few that made it.⁵³



Fig. 46

According to González, the *luchadores* were afraid that soon they would have been left without any bookings in the 1960s and 1970s. While today there are still fewer *luchadoras* than *luchadores*, there is a significant number of women wrestlers. Although, they still do not receive as much support as their male colleagues. A *lucha libre* program generally consists of five different matches. Even if very successful and cheered by their audience, the *luchadoras* merely wrestle in the first two *luchas* – the same as rookies and minis. As such, and as they are less often broadcast on television, they earn less. Hence, the *luchadoras* still use the arenas to build their public. The enterprise *Lucha Libre Femenil* (LLF) was founded in the city of Monterrey in 2000 to organize *luchadoras*-only events in their own *Arena Femenil*. *Luchadoras* who also wrestle in the U.S.A. or Japan, where they have an organizational structure dedicated solely to women wrestlers, make a living more easily through wrestling.⁵⁴ According to González, in contrast to her time, many

⁵³ Ibid., 60

Translation from Spanish: 'Porque la gente de los pueblitos nos hizo ídolos a *Chabe* y a mí. Como no teníamos apoyo de la televisión ni de las grandes empresas, tuvimos que ganarnos al público en cada plaza para que fueran a vernos. Fuimos de las pocas que lo lograron.'

⁵⁴ From 1968 to 2005 the wrestling promotion All Japan Women's Pro-Wrestling, since 2005 Sendai Girls' Pro Wrestling, 2006 Ice Ribbon and 2007 Pro Wrestling Wave.

Generally *luchadoras* are exposed to financial and physical precarity as they are mainly paid per *lucha*, or by the hour,

contemporary luchadoras have to undergo plastic surgery before stepping into the ring. It seems that promoters and luchadoras alike think that after such surgeries they would be more cherished and receive more television presence. The luchadoras' bodies have to be closer to the ones of the ring girls, who in the big arenas enter the ring between the caídas carrying a sign that displays the number of the upcoming round. But unlike the ring girls, who have to solely maintain a beauty patron, the luchadoras have to train hard and keep their bodies strong and agile as their position requires skill, speed, physical dominance and uninhibited use of space and motion in the ring.

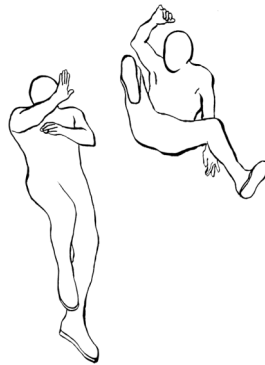


Fig. 47

One of these luchadoras is La Comandante, who had her debut in 1995. She also fought under the name La Nazi (1995-2009). In a conversation with me in 2008, she explained that she does not excuse violence against women and how this has influenced her:

I see that there are a lot of women who form a family and are beaten. I hate it when women are beaten. I don't like it when they hit them. And this has influenced me to show them, that if we fight, we can also achieve something. But many [women] don't give it any importance. I don't think I'll marry so that I don't get any aggression. Nor will I get kids. I don't want them to live through what I had to.⁵⁵

without collective representation (union-type negotiation), nor life or health insurance offered by the enterprises they work for.

⁵⁵ Translation from Spanish: 'Yo veo que hay muchas mujeres que forman su familia y las golpean. Yo soy enemiga de que golpeen las mujeres. No me gusta que las golpeen. Por eso me ha inspirado tanto en demostrarles que luchando podemos hacer las cosas. Pero muchas no le dan importancia en eso. Yo, yo no me pienso casar para que no me agreda nadie ni tener hijos. Para que no vivan lo que yo viví.'

La Comandante makes clear that even if many women do not consider violence against women an important issue, changes can happen if women fight against it. Her decision was not to commit herself to anyone, nor to give birth, but to become a luchadora. She recounted that her father was a luchador who fought under the name Argus. However, when her 'sister told him that we would like to be luchadoras, he said that this isn't something for women who are at home, that this was only for prostitutes.'⁵⁶ This comment represents the stereotypical dualism of female stereotypes: as either submissive wives and/or mothers who stay at home, or as those who leave and are demonized as fallen. Even though it stopped her sister entering *lucha libre*, La Comandante thought: 'No, I'll show my dad, that I'll stay in *lucha libre* without being a prostitute and I'll hit him where it hurts him the most.'⁵⁷ In this sense, she considered *lucha libre* as a way to fight back against her father, against men who beat up women and against colleagues who do not accept women in the luchas. La Comandante resisted the patriarchal environment and the social laws imposed on her despite the cultural and social attributions inscribed to femaleness and femininity.

Her colleague, the luchadora Pantera Sureña, who had her debut in 1969, decided to become a luchadora to 'show those damn guys that they weren't the only ones in the game.'⁵⁸ 'Maybe I was born a woman,' she added, 'but that's just an accident of nature. I'm just as brave as they are, if not more. And I'm ultrafeminine – and proud of it.'⁵⁹ This comment is one example of a luchadora who assures that her physical toughness is not accompanied by a deficiency of femininity. She thus describes herself as 'ultrafeminine'⁶⁰ while not turning away from her potential masculinity. Pantera Sureña considers being born accidentally as a woman as she is as plucky as men or even more.

⁵⁶ Translation from Spanish: 'Cuando mi hermana le comentó que nosotras queríamos ser luchadoras, él dijo que eso no era para las mujeres que están en la casa, que esto era para prostitutas.'

⁵⁷ Translation from Spanish: 'Le voy a demostrar a mi papá que no quiere a las mujeres que andan en la lucha que porque son prostitutas, pues yo sin ser prostituta ahí voy a estar y le voy a dar donde más le duele.'

⁵⁸ cited in Lourdes Grobet, *Espectacular de Lucha Libre* (México D.F.: Trilce Ediciones, 2006), 202

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.



LA CHOLA
DEBUT 1991

Fig. 48

Notions of femininity ‘are fluid and situational’ as much as notions of masculinity can be.⁶¹ They are a mode of enacting and reenacting received norms of femininity, and as such they are reified through repetition. The psychoanalyst Joan Riviere’s pivotal essay *Womanliness as a Masquerade* can arguably be read as suggesting that femininity is defined by a greater inauthenticity or alienation than masculinity.⁶² Femininity is characterized as a masquerade in a phallic economy of desire, that may or may not hide a repressed but potentially disrupting female eroticism and/or same sex desire. It may be argued, as feminist film theorist Mary Ann Doane does in her text *Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator*, that this:

[I]nauthentic quality of the masquerade embodies a potentially emancipatory power: whereas cinema constructs and manipulates the feminine as the object of gaze, thus denying the female subject an objective view of the self, masquerade reveals that “womanliness is a mask which can be worn and removed”⁶³

If femininity is indeed something that is “taken on”, it may very well also be taken off, and so, masquerade consequently draws attention to the process whereby femininity is constructed. As discussed in the first chapter, the deployment of a mask –its ability to display, conceal, substitute and transition at once– may open up a variety of possibilities. A mask allows the wearer to embody a role, which, in Riviere’s tract, is femininity. Riviere assumes that behind this mask of femininity lies no active, conscious subject who would be able to intervene. It is the mask itself that articulates feminine subjectivity. Nevertheless, as I have argued before, a mask is also able to grant its user authority, empowerment and/or immunity. With her insistence on ‘genuine womanliness and the “masquerade” [...] [being] the same thing’⁶⁴ Riviere, however, does not allow the possibility of “womanliness” outside of

⁶¹ Cornwell and Lindisfarne, 1994, 3

⁶² Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 10 (1929): 303-313.

⁶³ Mary Ann Doane, “Film and Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” *Screen* (1982): 66.

⁶⁴ Jaques Lacan, 1958, “The Signification of the Phallus,” *Écrits: A Selection*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1977/2002)
Riviere, 1929, 305

masquerade, nor the potential for a queer dimension of a masquerade.

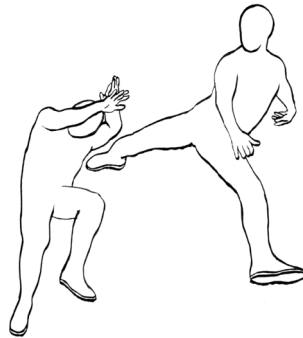


Fig. 49

While analyzing Jacques Lacan's understanding of masquerade, which he discusses in *The Signification of the Phallus*, Judith Butler suggests that there are two understandings of masquerade and asks:

whether masquerade conceals a femininity that might be understood as genuine or authentic, or whether masquerade is the means by which femininity and the contest over its "authenticity" are produced.⁶⁵

Lacan incorporated the masquerade in the distinctions between 'being' and 'having' the phallus. As the latter is the prerogative of men the "[...] "appearing as being" the Phallus that women are compelled to do is inevitably *masquerade*.⁶⁶ Butler contends that the term masquerade is significant as it implies contradictory meanings. Firstly, she points out that if the "being" is the masquerade, it would be possible to reduce all being to a form of appearing and as such all genders could be reduced to a play of appearances. However, as masquerade alludes to a femininity that had been before the masquerade, this masked feminine desire, or demand, might indicate the promise to disrupt and displace the phallogocentric signifying economy. Secondly, she shows that on the one hand masquerade can be understood as being the performative production of femininity and on the other hand, it can be read as a denial of feminine desire which assumes a prior femininity hardly

⁶⁵ Butler, 1999, 204

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 60

represented by a phallic economy.⁶⁷ These two understandings bring Butler to two possible forms of engagement: on the one hand masquerade as a performative production to activate challenging reflections and practices between “appearing” and “being” on gender as parodic (de)construction; and on the other hand, the denial of feminine desire that would bring about ‘feminist strategies of unmasking in order to recover or release whatever feminine desire has remained suppressed within the terms of the phallic economy.’⁶⁸ I consider Butler’s forms of engagement very useful as the space between “appearing” and “being” allows masquerade to articulate subjectivities. In this sense, masquerade might be able to release denied feminine desires while simultaneously subverting femininities.



Fig. 50

As discussed before, gender can be reified through repetition. In this process however, femininity assumes shifting meanings based on the repeater: in other words, on the speaker, as much as on the person described by or within the masquerade. Masquerading the feminine produces knowledge about femininity. Through its repetition female masquerade makes femininity apparent as a role. On the one hand femininity may be assumed unconsciously, imitated again and again, but on the other hand it can be appropriated and manipulated playfully and critically. *The Free Dictionary* connects the word “masquerade” with “masking”, “disguise”, “pretence” or “deceptive appearance” which refer to protecting or hiding from view, or to deceiving for a purpose.⁶⁹ The act of masking thus plays an important role within the masquerade. As discussed in the first chapter, masks are a medium for exploring boundaries and challenging fixed identities. They are not only able to disguise and conceal, they also display and substitute, and therefore, I argue, allow ways out and around the demands and conditioning of femininity.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ The Free Dictionary, “masquerade,” 2012, accessed March 29, 2012, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/masquerade>.

Moreover, a mask empowers its wearer to mock, to interfere, and to perform actions that might be considered inappropriate. Furthermore, a mask might be about unmasking through a conscious masking of the masquerade.

Importantly, Riviere does not only relate masquerade to women. She draws an analogy between the homosexual man and the women 'who wish for masculinity'.⁷⁰ Women wear womanliness as a mask 'both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if [they were] found to possess it.'⁷¹ Masculinity is thus directly linked to womanliness and possessed by women. Nevertheless, women consciously disguise their masculinities from their audience while 'homosexual men exaggerate their heterosexuality as a "defence" against their homosexuality.'⁷² It seems that, according to Riviere, homosexual men cannot acknowledge their homosexuality and as such need to exaggerate their heterosexuality to avoid the consequences.⁷³ This might be the case for some men but as we will see in the following section there are also men who embrace their homosexuality.

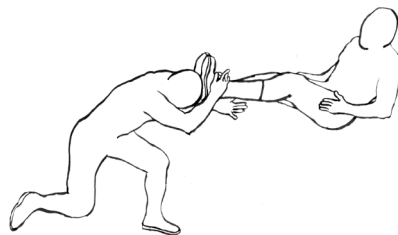


Fig. 51

Riviere's analogy brings Butler to the conclusion that we have to rethink the very notion of masculinity as well as femininity:

rooted in unsolved homosexual cathexes. The [...] refusal/domination of homosexuality culminates in the incorporation of the same-sexed object of desire and reemerges in the construction of discrete sexual "natures" that require and

⁷⁰ Riviere 1929, 303

⁷¹ Ibid., 305

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ A recent study, cited in the New York Times, shows a link between homophobia and homosexuality that people who are the most overtly homophobic tend to be closeted gays: Richard M. Ryan and William S. Ryan, 2012, "Homophobic? Maybe You're Gay," accessed May 6, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/29/opinion/sunday/homophobic-maybe-youre-gay.html?_r=1&ref=opinion.

institute their opposites through exclusion.⁷⁴

In this sense, rather than considering masculinity and femininity, homosexuality and heterosexuality, as opposites, they are considered to be intertwined, invested with psychosexual energy. They cannot be rethought without each other as they all reveal each others' constructions, performances and investments in different ways.



Fig. 52

In her book *Female Masculinity* Halberstam sets out to rethink masculinity via female masculinity, exploring homosexual masculine women in fiction, film and lived experiences.⁷⁵ She hopes to open a discussion on masculinity for women in such a way that 'masculine girls and women do not have to wear their masculinity as a stigma but can infuse it with a sense of pride and indeed power.'⁷⁶ Female masculinity, according to Halberstam, is not merely a perverse supplement to dominant configurations of gender, but masculinity itself cannot be fully understood unless female masculinity is taken into account. Halberstam claims that female masculinity is 'a specific gender with its own cultural history' rather than 'an imitation of maleness' or 'a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment'.⁷⁷ In this sense, masculinity must not be reduced down to the male body and its effects. It is possible to study masculinity without men. According to Halberstam empowering models of female masculinity have been neglected or misunderstood because of a cultural intolerance towards the gender ambiguity that masculine women

⁷⁴ Butler, 1999, 69

⁷⁵ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998)

⁷⁶ Halberstam, 1998, xi

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1, 77 and 9

represent.⁷⁸ Through claiming a specificity that is yet ambiguous, the “againsttogether” of female masculinity as ‘a specific gender’ and a ‘gender ambiguity’ intends to challenge ‘the privileged reservation of masculinity for men.’⁷⁹ Even though, as Riviere contends, masculinity is directly linked to womanliness and possessed by women, it is merely hidden instead of acted out. Female masculinity, as the following discussion of La Comandante exemplifies, gives rise to unease.



Fig. 53

The image above (Fig. 53) by Grobet from 2009, shows La Comandante still in her outfit as La Nazi. She looks proud and content standing in front of a wall in which a painting of El Santo, updated with a mobile in his hand, can be seen. As she points at him she makes a direct reference to his legacy and possibly positions herself as an heir. Moreover, by taking on the same pose as El Santo on the wall, she allows both their bodies to be compared: they have almost the same height and are similarly built. In a conversation with me, La Comandante made clear that she considers her body to be ‘already almost like one of a man’, and if she would have kept on going to the gym, to

⁷⁸ Ibid., xii

In Mexico, there are various reports of women, like María de la Luz Barrera or Angel/Angela Jiménez, who adopted male identities during the Mexican Revolution but later on returned to wearing women’s clothing and performing women’s roles in society as mothers and wives. Amelio Robles is another example, as she made the transition from an imposed feminine identity to a desired masculinity. See Gabriela Cano “Unconcealable Realities of Desire: Amelio Roble’s (Transgender) Masculinity in the Mexican Revolution,” in *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico*, ed. Jocelyn Olcott and Mary Kay Vaughan (London and New York: Duke University Press) and Elizabeth Salas, “The Soldadera in the Mexican Revolution: War and Men’s Illusions,” in *Women of the Mexican Countryside 1850-1990*, ed. Heather Fowler-Salamini, Mary and Kay Vaughan (Tucson: Arizona University Press, 1994)

⁷⁹ Ibid.

build her muscles with weights, she '[would be] totally a man'.⁸⁰ It was her mother's comment 'You aren't a woman anymore, you are a man'⁸¹ that kept her from bodybuilding more. La Comandante's mother considered her daughter's training, which caused visible changes in her appearance, as endangering of her femininity. She could not envision her daughters' gender equivocation as a possible mode of identification. It seems however, that La Comandante did not turn away from her own masculinity but rather decided not to pursue it far enough, to become 'totally a man'.⁸² 'Far from being an imitation of maleness,' Halberstam claims, 'female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity.'⁸³ Yet, as we have seen before, masculinity is reified through repetition during which the act of masking plays a significant role as to introduce twists, changes and incoherencies. The example of La Comandante exemplifies how much a person's physiognomy declares her or him to fail masculinity or femininity. There are signs of masculinity, among them the body's appearance, which obviously bespeak masculinity. These signs can also be achieved through training, as in the case of La Comandante, or by taking chemical substances such as hormones, anabolic steroids and potency pills, changing diet or hygiene, undergoing surgery, altering style or fashion, repeating poses and gestures, and other means employed by female-, male-, and trans-gender-born people. As such, it is impossible to reduce certain signs –for example, a built physique, power and strength– only to male-born people. To embrace the act of masking by making the mask of masculinity slip, makes it possible to challenge 'the privileged reservation of masculinity for men.'⁸⁴

Halberstam suggests that the 'widespread indifference to [and avoidance of] female masculinity [...] has sustained the complex social structures that pair masculinity with maleness, power and dominance.'⁸⁵ This is why I consider it to be important to discuss the different masculinities that have the potential to

⁸⁰ Translation from Spanish 'Mi cuerpo ya es casi de un hombre y luego con esas bolas voy a ser todo un hombre.'

⁸¹ Translation from Spanish: 'Tú ya no eres una mujer, eres un hombre.'

⁸² Translation from Spanish 'todo un hombre.'

⁸³ Halberstam, 1998, 1

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 2

destabilize this pairing, and to make it clear that masculinity is constructed by female- and trans-gender- as much as by male-born people. As pointed out in the first section of this chapter, some luchadores make use of parody, and in so doing expose norms, rather than embody extreme, aggressive and intransigent versions of normative masculinity. They, together with luchadoras and exóticos, as I will discuss in the next section, provide an imagery of an “againsttogether” of dominant masculinities and minority masculinities.



Fig. 54

The image above (Fig. 54) by Grobet from 1991, shows a powerful and built body that is not obviously that of a woman but that is obviously not that of a man. The face has no facial hair and the chest gives a hint of breasts. The arms are up in the air, the wrestler is about to untangle the leg and seems to be about to scream to let the opponent, the public, the viewer, know that she can rage, that she can fight, that she can win. She is the luchadora Martha Villalobos, who had her debut in 1979, and who came to be a champion on several occasions. In relation to her physical appearance she once explained that:

Now with the time and for the lucha I had to gain weight, although I went too far. Anyway, my character was liked as I'm very light, I'm incredibly agile, and that's an important part of my success; not anyone handles this weight nor moves like me in the ring, even more so being a woman.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ cited in Lola M. Fascinetto, *Sin Máscara ni Cabellera. Lucha Libre en Mexico hoy* (México D.F.: Marc Ediciones S.A. de C.V, 1992), 45

Translation from Spanish: 'Ahora con el tiempo y por la lucha tenía que embarnecer, aunque ya me excedí. De todos modos mi personaje gustó porque soy muy lijera, tengo una agilidad increíble, y eso es parte importante del éxito de mi carrera; este peso no cualquiera lo aguanta, y tampoco se mueve como yo arriba del ring, más siendo mujer.'

Her comment makes the tension of being a strong, corpulent woman obvious. On the one hand it has marked her success but on the other hand it is unusual for a woman to handle such weight. According to Halberstam, however, not all versions of female masculinity give rise to unease. Popular culture applauds figures of sexy and confident female masculinity gender transgression as long as they are heterosexual. Female masculinity becomes provocative however, when it is linked to the intimation of non-normative sexuality that might lead to no reproduction.⁸⁷ As the following words from Martha Villalobos clarify, luchadoras, due to their activities, were confronted with a general presumption that they could not reproduce:

It's a lie that luchadoras cannot procreate, it's wrong. Within the scene there are many luchadoras who are mums [...] I think we are more likely to get pregnant as we have healthier bodies, it's a lie that we lose our femininity.⁸⁸

Several photographs struck me the first time I looked through the pages of Grobet's book *Espectacular de Lucha Libre*, but one especially held my attention. It shows a luchadora feeding a baby, countering the presumption of infertility and underscoring luchadoras' ability to reproduce and nurture, in other words to mother.



Fig. 55

⁸⁷ Halberstam, 1998, 28

Halberstam gave the examples of Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2* (1991) and Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens* movie series (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997).

⁸⁸ cited in Fascinetto, 1992, 43

Translation from Spanish: 'Es mentira que las luchadoras no pueden procrear, es falso. Dentro del ambiente hay muchas luchadoras mamas [...] Pienso que el organismo de nosotras las luchadoras es más favorable al embarazo porque tenemos un cuerpo más sano, es mentira que se pierda [la feminidad].'

The image (Fig. 55) by Grobet depicts the luchadora La Briosa in a private space. She was active from the 1970s until 2001. Behind her I see a cut frame of a historical photograph showing a luchadora. Without seeing her head I am left to wonder: could she be La Dama Enmascarada, the first masked woman wrestler, or Irma González? The positioning of this image within Grobet's photograph suggests that the presented wrestler belongs to a dynasty of luchadoras. The simultaneous framing of a private space, which at the same time becomes a public one, and of a woman performing the roles of mother and luchadora triggered an uncertainty in my viewing and reading.

This photo is part of a series whose title is significant, but unfortunately not mentioned in the book.⁸⁹ I encountered the title instead in an article by the biologist and art theorist Araceli Borbosa. She discusses the title of the series *La doble lucha* (The double wrestling/struggle) and explains that it refers on the one hand to the lucha in the ring within the field of lucha libre as a site of work, and on the other, to the lucha within the domestic sphere with all of its implied duties.⁹⁰ In this sense, La Briosa can be read as a woman who embodies powers and incarnates the qualities of loving and nurturing motherhood and the courage of wrestling. In an interview, La Briosa, who decided to wear a mask, not wanting her father to recognize her, says that she considers being a housewife tougher than being a luchadora:

You have to iron, wash clothes and dishes. It's hard to come back from the gym and start with the chores: making dinner, sewing, leaving everything ready and then going to the arena to fight. That's tough, too, but it's a lot better than, for example, being a seamstress and sitting in front of the machine all day listening to the clac-clac-clac-clac...⁹¹

Since La Briosa belongs to the field of lucha libre as much as to the space of domestic works, she could be considered a mediator between them. Many of

⁸⁹ Lourdes Grobet, 2006

Translation from Spanish: 'Es mentira que las luchadoras no pueden procrear, es falso. Dentro del ambiente hay muchas luchadoras mamas [...] Pienso que el organismo de nosotras las luchadoras es más favorable al embarazo porque tenemos un cuerpo más sano, es mentira que se pierda [la feminidad].'

⁹⁰ Araceli Borbosa, "El discurso de género en las artes visuales, una nueva expresión de la cultura femenina," 2001, accessed July 3, 2011, http://www.museodemujeres.com/matriz/biblioteca/001_eldiscursodegenero.htm.

⁹¹ cited in Grobet, 2006, 201

the luchadoras have not only been luchadoras and/or mothers but also wives, lovers, daughters, security guards, police women, singers and so on. As they have had to face obstacles such as harassment and resistance, perhaps, *La múltiple lucha* (the multiple struggles) would be a more accurate overall title for the second section of this chapter.

Throughout her career Martha Villalobos was confronted with questions regarding her sexual orientation that could be read as yet another threat to reproduction. In 1992 she made clear that:

I respect everyone's private life, and if I were a lesbian I wouldn't deny it, because it's my life and no one [...] has the right to deny what I am. If I were a lesbian, I would accept it. [...] Right now, today, I don't consider myself in this case, but if I were, I'd scream it out loud proudly, because one's not doing it on purpose, so many people are born that way by deficiency. Today, to be appalled by homosexuality, because of the machismo that exists in Mexico, is just stupid. Unfortunately people cannot love, they don't know how to respect the life of any human being...⁹²

According to her words, Villalobos considered being lesbian a deficiency, even though she regards being aghast at homosexuality as stupid. Thirteen years later, however, in 2005, at the *Primer Festival Lésbico de la Ciudad de México* (First Lesbian Festival of Mexico City), she supported the campaign *Contra la violencia entre mujeres* (Against Violence Between Women). On September 23, 2009, she announced in the magazine *TV y Novelas*, that her partner was a woman. Together they raise two boys from former relationships. In the interview she clarified: 'I don't have a reason to hide my nature, but I'm not going to tell it to everyone. Currently, I am happy, very happy, I have my own life with my partner and my two children.'⁹³ Halberstam's words express

⁹² cited in Fascinetto, 1992, 50

Translation from Spanish: 'Yo respeto la vida privada de cada persona, y si fuera lesbiana no lo negaría, porque es mi vida y nadie [...] tiene derecho a negar lo que soy. Si fuera lesbiana, lo aceptaría. [...] Ahorita en la actualidad, no me considero en ese caso, pero si fuera con mucho orgullo lo gritaría, porque uno no lo hace a propósito, mucha gente nace así por deficiencia. En la actualidad, espantarse del homosexualismo, por ese machismo que hay en México, es una estupidez. Desagraciadamente la gente no sabe amar, no sabe respetar la vida de cualquier ser humano...'

⁹³ cited in Laura Luz Palmer, "La luchadora Martha Villalobos reconoce: "Mi pareja es una mujer,"" in *TV y Novelas* (México D.F.: Editorial Televisa, 2009)

Translation from Spanish: 'No tengo por qué ocultar mi naturaleza, pero tampoco voy a contestarle a todo el mundo. Actualmente soy feliz, muy feliz, tengo una vida propia con mi pareja y mis dos hijos.'

very well what is created when the most obvious rewards of masculinity – political power and representation– are cut off:

[M]any masculine women [and here I would position La Comandante and Martha Villalobos as examples] have had to create elaborate rationales for their ways of loving, their desire to provide for and protect [...] loved one[s], their decisions to live explicitly masculine lives.⁹⁴

I argue that the luchadoras create a particular complex exchange between their desires, strengths, vulnerabilities and their modes of loving, caring, fighting and wrestling. The bodies of the luchadoras have received direct violence in the ring and/or before entering the ring. Many of their bodies and performativities destabilize the normative roles assigned to women, thus challenging and even sometimes threatening the dominant and normative codes. The body marks these partitions most visibly through the continuous regulation of stereotypes – of race, ethnicity, gender, class, among others. As the comments of the luchadoras exemplify, all those who try to challenge, cross, work, live and/or fight between these conceptualizations are forced to confront the divisions and see the differences. The luchadoras have had to overcome obstacles in their participation from a multitude of sides: their partners, family, audience, co-workers and the institutions that control and sustain lucha libre. Marginalized by their gender, the luchadoras have fought to redefine the space of lucha libre claiming a subjectivity of women, masculine women, and female-bodied people. As La Comandante explains when she is asked how she can withstand ‘these pigheads’: ‘It’s that not even I knew what I could do... and, well, I’ve proven to myself that we women can do it, we can achieve anything we want.’⁹⁵

In the first section of this chapter, I established the complex history and characters of the macho, a figure that was directly linked to the production of the Mexican nation-state. In contemporary Mexico the macho has been

⁹⁴ Halberstam, 1998, 276

⁹⁵ Translation from Spanish: ‘¿Cómo es posible que aguantes estos burros? Es que ni yo sabía lo que podía hacer... Y, pues, me he mostrado a mi misma que las mujeres podemos y podemos llegar a donde queremos.’

constantly in formation in social practices as well as through a range of ideologies and imagery. In the ring however the luchadores cannot be simply read within the frame of machismo as they wittily, playfully and parodically demonstrate machismo as a social, cultural and incoherent construction. The second section has explored aspects of femininity by linking them to forms of masculinity. In particular, I have argued that the bodies of the luchadoras do not simply repeat the normative roles assigned to women, nor do they merely imitate masculinity to abuse and dominate. In doing so I am using Halberstam to try to explore other forms of masculinity and female masculinity that take place in lucha libre. Halberstam suggests that the:

[e]xchanges between male and female masculinities have the potential to go both ways. [...] If we shift the flow of power and influence, we can easily imagine a plethora of new masculinities that do not simply feed back into the static loop that makes maleness plus power into the formula of abuse but that re-create masculinity on the model of female masculinity.⁹⁶

I would consider this model of female masculinity stronger if it were one of female masculinities – a variety of female masculinities challenging hegemonic and normativ masculinities where machismo can be found. In the ring, I argue, many of the luchadoris do exactly that; that is, challenge notions of machismo through their performance of female masculinity. Nevertheless, I maintain that femininity and masculinity are directly linked to the dualist construction of sexed bodies as male and female. I would like to imagine a masculinity that embraces the female and a femininity that does not reject the male; an undoing of what is categorized as female or male. Alongside Antke Engel, I would like to ask:

How can we develop ideas, practices and representations that do not reduce gender to the alternative woman/man or feminine/masculine and do not lay down sexuality as meeting with or missing of heterosexuality?⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Halberstam, 1998, 276

⁹⁷ Engel, 2002, 57

In the following section, I will take a closer look at los exóticos, today generally understood to be homosexual. Might exóticos offer a representation that can be read as ambiguously gendered? Might they be read or understood as ‘prequeer’? Does their participation open up and offer prequeer histories, desires and performances before they could be read or understood as queer? What complex play of repetition and imitation is at stake in the construction of the exóticos?

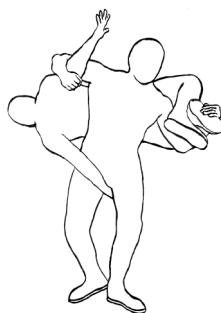


Fig. 56

2.3 Section 3: LA TERCERA CAÍDA – THE THIRD FALL Los Exóticos Enter the Ring

With the most elaborate costumes, make-up and elegant movements, el luchador exótico enters the arena and throws kisses to the audience as well as to his rivals, who answer back with yells and insinuating acclamations. The luchador Adrián –who today fights under the name Polvo de Estrellas– with whom I went to a lucha in Iztapalapa (see Chapter 3), describes his performance as such:

I get in the ring with a long black robe, cut from the finest fabric, the hair is dyed in an iridescent red and the face is half exposed and painted in colours. Adrián is overall fine and energetic and a little contemptuous. Before he starts the action he greets the audience. People are baffled by this exotic and unexpected vision.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ cited in Möbius, 2004, 311

Translation from Spanish: ‘Sube al ring con una bata larga negra, de finísima tela y de corte precioso, el cabello levemente teñido de un rojo tornasoleado y el rostro semidescubierto con un antifaz deliberadamente pintado de colores. Adrián es de ademanes finos y enérgicos y un poco despreciativo, saluda al respectable antes de entrar a la acción. La gente se queda desconcertada ante aquella visión exótica e inesperada.’

As mentioned in the introduction, it was a *lucha mixta* that drew me to the *luchas* in the first place. At that arena I could now sense how the participation of *exóticos* simultaneously provokes and satisfies the audience.



Fig. 57

2.3.1 Picking Up and Revising the Role of Los Exóticos

Over time, the *exóticos*' role has changed as it has been picked up and revised again and again. The first *luchador* to enter as an *exótico* was closer to the role of a dandy than a *luchador* who is generally understood to be homosexual.⁹⁹ Gardenia Davis, from the United States, and Lalo el Exótico, whose careers peaked in the 1940s and 1950s, would perfume themselves, spray scent on the ring, on the audience and/or hand out flowers to the ladies just before the match – sometimes they would even have assistants who would groom them. When Elena Poniatowska asked the *luchador* El Santo why he did not use eau-de-Cologne like other *luchadores* he clarified: 'Well, those *luchadores* are called *exóticos*.'¹⁰⁰



Fig. 58

⁹⁹ According to the literature theorist Michael K. Schuessler 'the first conception of male homosexuality in Mexico is the prototype of a European dandy, who is similar to the Mexican *loca*-effeminate, weak, apathetic: monocle, gloves, cane and a striking ring in each of his delicate fingers-.' Translation from Spanish: 'La primera concepción sobre la homosexualidad masculina en México se debe al prototipo del dandi europeo, que es similar a la *loca* mexicana-afeminado, endeble, apático: monóculo, guantes, bastón y un anillo llamativo en cada uno de sus delicados dedos-.' See Michael K. Schuessel, "Vestidas, locas, mayates y machos. Historia y homosexualidad en el cine," in *México se escribe con J*, ed. Michael K Schuessel and Miguel Capistrán (México D.F.: Editorial Planeta Mexicana, 2010), 155

¹⁰⁰ Elena Poniatowska, *Todo México. Tomo I* (México D.F.: Editorial Diana, 1990), 265
Translation from Spanish: 'Bueno, esos se llaman *luchadores* *exóticos*.'

The stills (Fig. 58), from the film *El luchador fenómeno* (The Fantastic Wrestler, 1952), show one of those luchadores, Lalo el Exótico, as he is being combed and perfumed right before a lucha.¹⁰¹ Significantly, the act of “beautification” is a public act that forms part of the performance in the ring. Meanwhile, Lalo’s team partner –the film’s hero–, acted by Adalberto Martínez “Resortes”, asks his manager about what we see: “Don’t you think that this guy is... (whispers something inaudible)”. Resortes’ manager responds: “No, he is aristocratic... we Mexicans have a slightly more tanned skin.”¹⁰² This sequence depicts the first exóticos as not outspoken homosexuals but rather as elegant dandys. Though they have tanned brown skin, they belong to a higher aristocratic class as they can afford eau-de-Cologne and an assistant who takes care of their appearance. The luchador exótico El Bello Greco explains that it was rather:

For special individuals like Sergio El Hermoso and I, who for 12 years have been perfuming the rings and showing that aristocrats fill the arenas. Our noble pueblo [the people, the working class] likes us, likes it when its heroes smell good.¹⁰³



Fig. 59

Through the act of perfuming, Bello Greco aimed to resignify the general understanding that the luchas are, ‘the profession for insignificant and vulgar people.’¹⁰⁴ This reading was rather subject to a phantasmagoria that some other wrestlers offered, as Sergio El Hermoso clarifies: ‘Our [aristocracy] has no equal. We put the class in the lucha and condemn these other wrestlers who go to the ring without bathing or putting on perfume.’¹⁰⁵ They thus did not only consider redefining a

general reading but they renamed their class as aristocratic due to their refined image, based on the acquisition of perfume. They were concerned with class representation and rejected affiliated stereotypical behaviour such

¹⁰¹ Fernando Cortés, *El luchador fenómeno*, 1952

¹⁰² Fernando Cortés, *El beisbolista fenómeno*, 1952

Translation from Spanish: “No se le hace que este cuatito es ... [susurra algo inaudible]” “No, es que es de sangre azul...” “...los mexicanos tenemos la piel un poco más bronceada.”

¹⁰³ cited in Grobet, 2006, 38

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

as not being able to take a bath or, as we have seen in the first chapter, being scorned as *naquis*. Nevertheless, through the dialogue of the film I can surmise that *Resortes* asks his manager if *Lalo* is homosexual. The appearance of *Lalo* and his mannerisms might thus be read as prequeer, as they challenged and rendered gender, sexuality and sexual orientation ambiguous.

The film *El luchador fenómeno* is a fantasy-comedy that sequels *El beisbolista fenómeno* (The Fantastic Baseball Player, 1952) and illustrates how wrestling leaped to national prominence in real life as was considered to be as important as baseball in the movies. In the first film, *Resortes* became a famous pitcher thanks to the supernatural aid of a ghost. In *El luchador fenómeno*, he originally wants to extend his prowess to football, but a deceased wrestler supplants the spirit of a late football player to have a chance to enter the ring one last time in *Resortes*' body. Within the film both *Lalo el Exótico* and *Resortes* are referred to as "exóticos". However, *Resortes*' performance of an *exótico* is a different one because he mocks wrestling, other wrestlers, their training and their masculine performances. As much as there are a variety of *machismos* at stake and on display, *exóticos* also apply different styles and strategies that take on distinctive agencies.

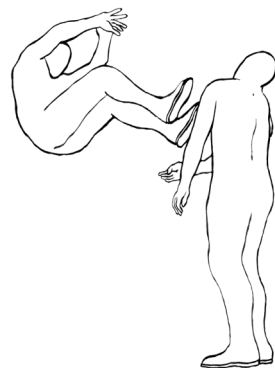


Fig. 60

In the early 1980s the *exóticos* movement consisting of *luchadoris* such as: *Adorable Rubí*, *Rudy Reyna*, *El Bello Perfumado*, the team of *El Bello Greco* and *Sergio El Hermoso* plus the trio *Pimpinela Escarlata*, *May Flowers* and

Casandro, was named “la ola lila” (the lilac wave) by the magazine *Box y Lucha*. In an interview with me El Bello Greco, who wrestled with Sergio El Hermoso as the first *pareja exótica* (exotic couple) for 15 years, insisted that ‘to wrestle delicate is just an act’¹⁰⁶:

I have 8 kids, so I am a man. Of my kids two are women and six are men of which three are professional luchadores, though no one is an *exótico*. I think I am a man. [...] After us came Rudy Reyna, who is gay and after him Baby Sharon, who is gay, too, and so forth...¹⁰⁷

For El Bello Greco the opposition seems rather to be between being gay and being a man, rather than between gay and heterosexual. This corresponds well with a traditional understanding in Mexico that the meaning of masculine homosexual practices is acquired through the distinction of being active or passive in a sexual encounter: ‘Mainly the individual who allegedly enacts the anal/passive role is stigmatized as he assumes female and, as such, “inferior” behaviour. [...] The one who is perceived as *passive* is the only one considered to be “truly homosexual”.’¹⁰⁸ As El Bello Greco also mentioned having 8 children, he presented himself simultaneously as active in sexual encounters. In this sense, homosexual and heterosexual are not considered to be opposing identities facing each other, rather they are “againsttogether”.

For El Bello Greco, as much as for Máximo today, it is important to highlight that the act he had put on had nothing to do with his sexual desires. By contrast other *exóticos* publicly have embraced a homosexual identity since approximately the early 1980s.¹⁰⁹ Casandro states that ‘even though we are weak or homosexuals, in the ring we have the same abilities as the so-called

¹⁰⁶ Translation from Spanish: ‘Luchar delicados solo es una presentación.’

¹⁰⁷ Translation from Spanish: ‘Yo tengo ocho hijos, lo que soy hombre. De mis hijos hay tres mujeres y seis hombres, de ellos son tres luchadores aunque nadie es un *exótico*. Creo que soy hombre. [...] Después de nosotros vino Rudy Reyna, quien es gay y después Baby Sharon y ahí ya...’

¹⁰⁸ Rodrigo Laguarda, “*De lo raro al ambiente: aproximación a la construcción de la identidad gay en la Ciudad de México*,” *Cílo*, Nueva Época, vol. 5, núm. 34 (2005): 122

Translation from Spanish: ‘Es principalmente el individuo de quien se presume que juega el rol anal/pasivo quien resulta estigmatizado por asumir una conducta femenina y, por tanto, “inferior”. [...] El sujeto percibido como *pasivo* es el único considerado como “verdaderamente homosexual”.’

¹⁰⁹ This coincides with the time during the second half of the 1970s and the early 1980s when the term gay began to spread in Mexico and in the large cities of Latin America. See, among others, Stephen O. Murray and Manuel Arboleda G., “Stigma Transformation and Relexification, *Gay* in Latin America”, in *Latin American Male Homosexualities*, by Stephen O. Murray (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 138-139.

machos, and we show it.’¹¹⁰ To me, some of their performances resemble the already known representation of la loca – the effeminate homosexual. But what could be the possible reasons for the transformation from the dandy role of exóticos in the 1950s to the exóticos that came into play from the 1980s on? Could the widespread representation of la loca featured in the ficheras’ film subgenre be a possible link between them?

2.3.2 La Loca and her Representation in Las Ficheras Vs. in the Ring



Fig. 61

The term loca literally stands for madwoman, but in its slang derivation, it is related to queer ‘and is used as a synonym for joto or homosexual but with emphasis on the femininity, more or less like the English “queen”.’¹¹¹ It is a common everyday word used as an insult, but it might be also applied in very specific contexts as a term of affection. In Puerto Rico, it alludes to a very specific character in one of the island’s most famous regional/religious celebrations: the fiestas de Santiago Apóstol (Feasts of St. James the Apostle) in Loíza Aldea. The loca is embodied by heterosexual men who cross-dress for the occasion, harass and tease passers-by in a playful and/or aggressive manner.¹¹² The word loca also suggests a form of hysterical identity that lacks sanity and reason, composure, or assimilation to dominant norms: mad women, effeminate homosexuals, rebels. In this sense, I would like to relate loca to the term queer. Loca as maricón friends call each other might be a sign of complicity and understanding, and not necessarily a hostile insult, joke or putdown. If so,

Rico, it alludes to a very specific character in one of the island’s most famous regional/religious celebrations: the fiestas de Santiago Apóstol (Feasts of St. James the Apostle) in Loíza Aldea. The loca is embodied by heterosexual men who cross-dress for the occasion, harass and tease passers-by in a playful and/or aggressive manner.¹¹² The word loca also suggests a form of hysterical identity that lacks sanity and reason, composure, or assimilation to dominant norms: mad women, effeminate homosexuals, rebels. In this sense, I would like to relate loca to the term queer. Loca as maricón friends call each other might be a sign of complicity and understanding, and not necessarily a hostile insult, joke or putdown. If so,

¹¹⁰ cited in Fascinetto, 1992, 195

Translation from Spanish: ‘aunque somos débiles u homosexuales, arriba del ring tenemos la capacitación de los que se llaman machos y lo demostramos.’

¹¹¹ Annick Prieur, *Mema’s house: Mexico City: on transvestites, queens and machos* (London, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 25

‘The words joto or jota (the same word but in feminine gender) are slang words used synonymously with the Spanish noun homosexual. [...] One explanation I have been given for the joto is that it is the name of a Spanish dance where men move in ways that are seen as feminine. But Buffington (1997) states that the word comes from the cell block “J” (pronounced jota in Spanish) of the Federal Penitentiary in Mexico City where formerly the overtly homosexuals inmates were isolated.’

¹¹² See Lowell Fiet, Lowell, “Las Fiestas (imparables) de Santiago Apóstol,” *Claridad* (August 17-24, 2006): 16, 29. Félix Jiménez, *Las prácticas de la carne: construcción y representación de las masculinidades puertorriqueñas* (San Juan: Ediciones Vértigo, 2004) and Rosoamond King, “Dressing Down: Male Transvestism in Two Caribbean Carnivals.” *Sargasso Special Issue* (2005): 25-36. on the figure of the loca in the Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol in Loíza Aldea.

it might be applied to do justice to cruelty as an art and/or strategy for survival or to simply acknowledge self-hate. Novo states in his text *Las locas y la Inquisición* (The Locas and the Inquisition) that ‘THERE WERE ALWAYS locas in Mexico.’¹¹³ He points out that ‘the wise Franciscan exposes in the Book X of its History that the "meddlesome" appear [...], [who] present themselves as womanish or effeminate when they walk or talk.’¹¹⁴ He furthermore refers to Díaz del Castillo, who describes ‘all the others of those meddlesome people [...], who were dressed like women boys’.¹¹⁵ The loca is thus a contemporary figure with a history that dates back at least to the 16th Century.

A representation of la loca can be found in the ficheras’ film subgenre that successfully ran in Mexico from the early 1970s to the mid 1980s.¹¹⁶ Films that draw from prostitution melodrama, vaudeville-like sketches, soft-core pornography and the cabaretera films from the 1940s and 1950s.¹¹⁷ Without a doubt, it is not the subgenre’s visual or narrative pleasure (to which I would refer as rather poor), nor the commercial success, rather the inclusion of a gay male character –many times a loca– in the ficheras films that draws me to them. However, this inclusion is ambivalent. It makes male homosexuality visible but does so at the price of stereotyping it.

¹¹³ Salvador Novo, *Las Locas, El Sexo, Los Burdeles* (México, D.F., Barcelona, Bogota, Lima, Santiago: Organización Editorial Novaro. S. A, 1972), 11

Translation from Spanish: ‘HUBO SIEMPRE locas en México.’

On February 11, 1672 during the Festivo aparato de San Francisco de Borja the first parade of locas took place in Mexico City. See Enrique Serna, 1979, “Primer desfile de locas,” in *México se escribe con J*, ed. Michael K Schuessel and Miguel Capistrán (México D.F.: Editorial Planeta Mexicana, 2010)

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Translation from Spanish: ‘que el sapientísimo franciscano expone en el Libro X de su Historia aparecen los “sométicos”, [...] en todo se muestra[n] mujeril[es] o afeminad[os], en el andar o en el hablar.’

I am aware that somético is generally translated as sodomite. I made the decision to use meddlesome instead building on Novo’s link between the sodomite and the loca. In this sense I introduce the idea of the loca as meddlesome. Rather than keeping the clearly negatively connoted sodomite, I think of meddlesome as someone being active in a liminal space is closer to how I understand the loca.

¹¹⁵ Novo, 1972, 13

Translation from Spanish: ‘todos los demás de ellos sométicos [...], que andaban vestidos en hábito de mujeres muchachos’

¹¹⁶ For example in 1981 out of a total production of ninety-seven films around thirty were ficheras. As a whole they were the most commercially successful films of their time. (García Riera, 1986, 325)

¹¹⁷ The cabaretera or rumbera films emerged during the sexenio of President Miguel Alemán (1946-1952). The dance halls and cabarets, where key places of the films, are two of the sites Monsiváis (1993, 144-145) describes as the quintessential ‘mythic atmospheres’ of the films of the Golden Age. Ana López (1993, 158) points out, the liminal space of the nightclub posed a formidable challenge to the constrained moral order of the home and family: ‘Nowhere else have screen women been so sexual, so willingful, so excessive, so able to express their anger at their fate through vengeance.’

The cultural theorist Sergio de la Mora points out that:

Ficheras films serve as a cultural index for various sex-related transformations in modern Mexican society. Among these changes are the public recognition of homosexuals, the growth of the sex industry via film and video, a greater objectification of the female body, and an increased tolerance for the open use of “bad words.”¹¹⁸

The consistent inclusion of male or female transvestites (hetero- and homosexual), drag queens and las locas in the ficheras films is emblematic of larger social changes taking place in the politically uncertain years leading up to and following the massacre at the Tlatelolco Plaza in 1968 (during the presidency 1964–1970 of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz). These changes were shaped by growing social disparities, the government’s lack of respect of civil liberties and human rights, the impact of feminism and the women’s movement, and the homosexual liberation movement.¹¹⁹ Ramírez Berg remarks in relation to the ficheras films that ‘homosexuality is never presented as an alternative life-style [...]. The more manly the male, the more easily the mere suggestion of homosexuality paralyzes him sexually.’¹²⁰ Moreover, he argues that maricones are needed within the subgenre’s construction of machismo: ‘the debilitation of machismo together with the insistent confirmation of male power and the obsessive denial of homosexuality only reveal how desperately incoherent el macho’s position truly is.’¹²¹ Consequently, according to him, the macho in the ficheras films would lose its distinctiveness if the loca is not shaping and complementing the social construction of el macho. Here, Ramírez Berg agrees with Bartra who suggests that there is no place for the man who is neither macho nor a maricón.¹²² In other words Bartra claims that there is a distinction between two types of men: the macho and the

¹¹⁸ Sergio de la Mora, *Cinemachismo. Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2006), 111

At this time the production, distribution, and exhibition of hard-core pornography was still prohibited in Mexico. This ban was lifted in the early 1990s.

¹¹⁹ For an overview of Mexican Feminisms see Griselda Gutiérrez Castañeda (2002). On the homosexual liberation movement see Joseph Carrier (1995), Jose Maria Covarrubias (2002), Ian Lumsden (1991), Norma Mogrovejo (2000) and several publications of Carlos Monsiváis (For example 2001, 2002, 2009)

¹²⁰ Ramírez Berg, 1992, 129

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 130

maricón (in plural maricones) is the superlative of marica, generally translate as fag

¹²² Bartra, 1987, 214

homosexual. Obviously both distinctions are normative.

Unlike these views on the macho-maricón dyad, which Levi also sees represented in *lucha libre*, I would not draw such a fixed reading concerning polymorph representations.¹²³ The film critic Richard Dyer examines how the stereotyping of homosexuals opens space for the visualization of homosexuality. He proposes that stereotypes are deeply involved with constructions of gender identities, i.e. active male drive / passive female receptivity.¹²⁴ As such, Dyer identifies signs of gestures, expressions, stances, clothing, and social environments that serve to show that someone is homosexual. He categorizes four homosexual types: the In-between, the Macho, the Sad Young Man, the Lesbian Feminist.¹²⁵ The In-between type refers to both the queen and the dyke. They represent homosexuality subverting the idea that gender proceeds from biological sex. Rather than performing neat, unambiguous, fix gender roles, they are in-between, on a border between genders. Indeed, as De la Mora contends, all representations of male homosexuality in the *ficheras* films fall into the first category: the In-between type.¹²⁶ This is where *la loca* can be found, too. Even though Dyer makes clear that there are any number of variations of the queen and the dyke, he refers to the queen being effeminate and the dyke mannish.¹²⁷ The In-Between, when applied in a derogatory way, alludes to no being a “real” woman, or a man as defined in heterosexual terms. As they are homosexuals they fail ‘true masculinity and femininity.’¹²⁸ In this regard, Dyer too easily throws away the possibility of rendering these types ambiguous, and instead relates them back to the binary gender order.

For Dyer the In-Between type represents on the one hand a reification of a gender duality but on the other hand it may also reject these rigid gender

¹²³ Levi, 2008, 151

‘Lucha libre is a space in which the macho-maricón continuum is represented not only in the relative positioning of men competing over who is “more” macho but also by men who have abdicated their masculinity.’

¹²⁴ Richard, Dyer, 1993, “Seen to be believed: some problems in the representation of gay people as typical,” in *The Matter of Images. Essays on representations* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), 19-24

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 26-48

¹²⁶ Mora, 2006, 113

¹²⁷ Dyer, 2002, 30

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

roles. I would argue that stereotypes can be used to explicate the scenario's particularities through differentiation: Rather than simply repeating stereotypes, thus reinforcing them, they can also appear in a context in which they have to set up an alternative scenario so as to forfeit their implicitness and/or their hegemony. As we have seen, gender can behave like a rigid category through repetition. Nevertheless, within the repetition lies the potential to deconstruct, refigure and reposition gender.¹²⁹ In this regard then, does the loca set up normative motives and reinforce them through repetition? Or do these repetitions allow for more performative shifts that may cause equivocation?

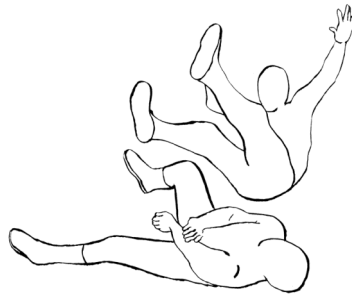


Fig. 62

The poet, anthropologist and sociologist Néstor Perlongher called himself loca on more than one occasion. From the number of variations of gender, or the 'thousand sexes' –which he draws from the work of Deleuze and Guattari–, he focuses with special intensity on los miches, los travestis (transvestites) and las locas.¹³⁰ They are mostly marginalized subjects who 'exhibit and exaggerate their generic-sexual attributes or the ones of others, so that masculinity and femininity are challenged.'¹³¹ Perlongher claims that rigid gender roles are clearly contested through exhibition and exaggeration. This point of view contrasts with Dyer who states:

In-betweenism [...] [i]n its tragic and violent modes [...] reinforces negative views of gay sexuality; in its representation of the nastiness or ridiculousness of not being really one sex or the

¹²⁹ See Chapter 2, 51-54

¹³⁰ Néstor Perlongher, *Prosa plebeya* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2008), 88

¹³¹ cited in Roberto Echevarren, "Prólogo," in Néstor Perlongher *Poemas completos: 1980-1992*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1997), II

Translation from Spanish: 'exhiben y exageran sus atributos genérico-sexuales, o los de otras, de manera tal que la masculinidad y la feminidad se pone en duda.'

other, it serves to maintain the notion of rigid gender role differentiation. Yet it may also, through a paradoxical inversion, embody a rejection of those roles.¹³²

Even if Dyer grants that In-betweenism may embody a rejection of a hierarchized binary gender order, he classifies it once again in the logic of a binary opposition. Engel rather proposes a “Strategie der VerUneindeutigung” (queer strategy of equivocation) that emphasises:

[P]ractices, processes as well as relations of power, knowledge and "truth" (Foucault). It tries to subvert those mechanisms that secure the working of a normative heterosexual gender order or any other order which seems to be "natural" or unquestionable. It intervenes into regimes of "normality" and processes of normalization by revealing ambiguity where a single truth is claimed, where a clear line is drawn, or an entity is stabilized. It functions as an answer to the critique of identity politics as it intervenes in the principle of identity. Therefore a queer strategy of equivocation favors representations and practices, which resist being pinned down to a single meaning, but materialize the processes of the construction of realities and the conditions of power at work in these processes.¹³³

Could Perlongher's approach be called one of equivocation? According to a queer strategy of equivocation this would mean the search for production processes that avoid a classificatory logic.

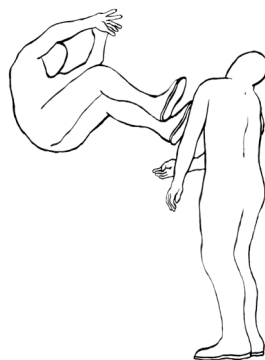


Fig. 63

Even if the portrayal of la loca in the ficheras films is mostly consistent with

¹³² Dyer, 2002, 37

¹³³ Engel, 2002, 4 and 5

the belief that gay men are effeminate, I argue that their representations resist being easily pinned down to a single meaning.¹³⁴ Las locas deliberately reject conventional male behaviour by acting “meddlesome” – that is, they are active in a liminal space where their performative acts may allow shifts and their “meddlesome” interventions may cause equivocation. In this sense, I propose Perlongher's concept of an endless variety of sexes could be interpreted as part of a queer strategy of equivocation. La loca can be found among this variety of sexes, as the result of (self)representations which have arisen from the domain of the imaginary and have been translated into the public sphere. Perlongher states that:

La loca “knows” [...] that masculinity is always a theatre on the cusp of an error and wandering, that his manhood is a performance and, as such, you can always take a detour¹³⁵



Fig. 64

Sometimes such a detour can be ‘to exhibit and exaggerate their generic-sexual attributes or the ones of others’.¹³⁶

Nevertheless, la loca in the ficheras films seldom moves the plot forward or controls the event. They are not set up as active subjects. In comparison to la loca in the ficheras films, the practices of exóticos position them as active subjects.

Within the luchas ‘the theatre on the cusp of an error and wandering’¹³⁷ is taken seriously. The performative character of

la loca is reflected in the role of the exótico. Their verbal and bodily enactments are brought forth publicly, repetitively, accounting for the arbitrary nature of the classification of signs (racial, ethnic, sexual, gender, class, etc.) and the possibility of their manipulation, reinvention, contestation and/or equivocation.

¹³⁴ Exceptionally, a representation of a macho homosexual type can be found, for example, in the film *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* (Doña Herlinda and her son, 1987, directed by Jaime Humberto Hermosillo)

¹³⁵ Perlongher, 2008, 30

Translation from Spanish: ‘La loca ‘sabe’ [...] que la masculinidad es un teatro siempre en la inminencia del error y la errancia, que su virilidad es una performance y que, como tal, siempre puede tomar un desvío.’

¹³⁶ cited in Roberto Echevarren, “Prólogo,” in Néstor Perlongher *Poemas completos: 1980-1992*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1997), II

Translation from Spanish: ‘exhiben y exageran sus atributos genérico-sexuales, o los de otras’

¹³⁷ Perlongher, 2008, 30

Translation from Spanish: ‘un teatro siempre en la inminencia del error y la errancia’.

At this point I think it is important to explore and take on board Anzaldúa’s argument for ‘a tolerance for ambiguity’ that ‘not only sustains contradictions, [it] turns the ambivalence into something else.’¹³⁸ I would argue that the moment in which ambiguity is revealed is precisely where a “Strategie der VerUneindeutigung” might come into play. Particularly if we keep in mind that the awareness of this strategy ‘is only useful if the flexibility and pluralism of the gender order can be used in relation to a decomposition of hierarchies and heteronormative privileges.’¹³⁹ Consequently, it is important to consistently question ambiguity so that it does not create yet other power formations and hierarchies leading towards subordination and exclusion – turning ambiguity into a permanent self-reflexive process.

The exótico May Flowers makes clear that ‘lucha libre is not virile par excellence, because it’s been demonstrated that even women, little people and homosexuals like us can develop it’.¹⁴⁰ The identification of specific gender conditionalities, as with, for example, the conclusion that virility does not exclusively go hand in hand with being a tall, heterosexual man, might open spaces where the exóticos are better able, through their own agency and performance, to make their appearance explicitly. However, we need to ask further, which forms of agency are developed and which powerful conditionalities and appearances take effect in the luchas?

2.3.3 A La Luz (Into the Light) – The Meddlesome Positions of the Exóticos

¿Marica quién?
¿Marica tú?

Queer who?¹⁴¹
Queer you?

¹³⁸ Anzaldúa, 2007, 101

¹³⁹ Engel, 2002, 229

Translation from German: ‘Eine Strategie der VerUneindeutigung ist nur dann sinnvoll, wenn die Flexibilisierung und Pluralisierung der Geschlechterordnung im Hinblick auf einen Abbau von Hierarchien und heteronormativen Privilegien genutzt werden kann.’

¹⁴⁰ cited in Fascinetto, 1992, 184

Translation from Spanish: ‘La lucha libre no es viril por excelencia porque se ha demostrado que tanto mujeres, seres pequeños, y homosexuales, como es nuestro caso, la podemos desarrollar.’

¹⁴¹ I am aware that marica and the related superlative maricón and diminutive maricita, are generally translated as faggot. I made the decision to use queer as I think that seems closer to how I see LOS NIGHT QUEENS positioning themselves.

<i>¿Marica yo?</i> <i>Marica Ha-Ha</i>	Queer me? Queer Ha-Ha
[...]	[...]
<i>Valor a la luz si eres un gay tú</i> <i>Piénsalo Piénsalo</i> <i>Es tu vida y si dicen po' que digan</i> <i>Que digan lo que quieran</i> <i>Valor, Valor Mucho Valor</i> <i>Yo curro en un amario</i> <i>Sal de ahí</i> <i>Y ven pa' aquí</i> <i>Tu destino es ser feliz</i> <i>FIESTA, FIESTA</i> <i>PLUMA, PLUMA GAY</i>	Be brave, come out into the light if you are gay Think about it It's your life and if they talk let them talk Let them say whatever they want Be brave, be brave I work in a closet Get out of there And come here Your destiny is to be happy PARTY, PARTY GAY FEATHERS
[...]	[...]
<i>Que importa si el niño sale gay</i> <i>Tú has nacido gay</i> <i>Aunque cueste hay que gritarlo</i> <i>SOY GAAAAAAYYYYYYY</i> <i>FIESTA, FIESTA</i> <i>PLUMA, PLUMA GAY</i>	What's the problem if the kid is born gay You've been born gay Even if it's hard it has to be screamed I AM GAAAAAYYYYYYY PARTY, PARTY GAY FEATHERS
[...]	[...]
<i>¿Marica quién?</i> <i>¿Marica tú?</i> <i>¿Marica yo?</i> <i>Marica Ha-Ha</i>	Queer who? Queer you? Queer me? Queer Ha-Ha

The song *Marica tú* by Los Morancos de Tirana, a cover version of the 2003 international hit *Dragostea Din Tei* by O-Zone, was used by the team of exóticos LOS NIGHT QUEENS – active from 2007 to 2009. The first time I heard it was in 2008 when I joined Polvo de Estrellas to a lucha in Iztapalapa where a lot of people in the audience danced and sang along to it. Soon afterwards I learnt that *Marica tú* had become a radio hit and a gay anthem in many countries across Latin America. With this song, the exóticos' group composed of Polvo de Estrellas, Nygma, Jessy and Yuriko, positioned itself openly as queer and basking in the limelight of the ring regardless of how the audience might have responded. However, not all of them had started their

own careers as exóticos.



Fig. 65

In a conversation, Polvo de Estrellas told me that he had begun to train as a luchador at the age of thirteen. After eight years of wrestling as a masked 'luchador hombre' he changed to Triple AAA, where it was recommended that he should fight as an exótico. However, with his first character, Faces I, he 'didn't have much work', so he changed to la Llorona Loca, but 'neither did anything happen', so he wrestled as an exótico clown: Coco Rosa.¹⁴² Then, in 2001, the promoter Antonio Peña recommended him to become Polvo de Estrellas. At the beginning his make-up and outfit were designed by Antonio Peña but over time Polvo de Estrellas became increasingly responsible for his own appearance, and now he does his make-up and costumes entirely himself. As much as initially 'it wasn't my style' to fight as an exótico, today, even if 'in my daily life I don't use makeup, as a luchador exótico I let out everything that I have inside.'¹⁴³ Polvo de Estrellas makes clear that sometimes the opportunity to fight as an exótico can lift up a career: 'I was never outstanding as a luchador hombre but as a luchador exótico, I triumph.'¹⁴⁴ This is also the explanation he gives for Máximo, who has been wrestling as exótico since 2004. Máximo explains in the short documentary *Máximo*: 'There's some theatre, in the sense that I don't swing the other way. When [Máximo] arrives in the ring and the [audience] whistles at him, provoke him, spoil him. I love it. I really like that, it makes me feel good.'¹⁴⁵ Before he received all this attention he had wrestled under the ring name Corazón de Dragón, later worked as Pepe Rous. He also played the character of El Brazo Jr. who was supposed to be the son of El Brazo before he appeared as Máximo in the ring.

¹⁴² In 1992, Antonio Peña, a former luchador himself, founded the Mexican professional wrestling promotion Triple A - [Asistencia Asesoría y Administración](#) (AAA).

¹⁴³ Translation from Spanish: 'No era mi estilo.' 'En mi vida cotidiana no me maquillo y nada. Pero de ser luchadori exótico saco todo lo que traigo dentro.'

¹⁴⁴ Translation from Spanish: 'Nunca sobresalí como luchadori hombre pero como luchadori exótico triunfo.'

¹⁴⁵ Raúl Cuesta and Anais Huerta, *Máximo*, 13:17 mins. (México, n.d., 2006)

Translation from Spanish: 'Tiene un poco de teatro en el aspecto, pues, que no soy del otro bando. En el momento que salga Máximo le chiflen, que lo provoquen, que lo mimen. Eso me fascina. Me gusta mucho. Me agrada.'



Fig. 66

Grobet's photography (Fig. 66) from 2009 shows Máximo in one of his typical looks –a toga and Mohawk in pink– and the luchadora India Sioux. They are accompanied by a world of animation, action and collectible figures, toys and DVDs. Both of them could easily be part of the extended family of *The Simpsons*, whose portrait hangs prominently above them. Appropriately, this photo is part of Grobet's series "The Family Portraits" (2009). I could easily imagine India Sioux and Máximo as toy action figures positioned on the shelf to their left, and I wonder: how much are they mainly fantasy characters? The drawn portrait to Máximo's right prevents my travel into a fantasy world. This portrait depicts India Sioux, almost looking down on Máximo, as he is about to make one of his famous pirouettes. He is thus framed by India Sioux sitting on the sofa and her portrait. They are both looking at me, the viewer. Grobet's photo is a portrait within a portrait, all the more so because India Sioux and Máximo are from famous luchadoris' families. This photo, however, is also suggestive of Máximo's sexual orientation. Outside the ring India Sioux and Máximo are married and have a son who was born in 2009. Since then India Sioux has not been back to the ring. In late May 2010, Máximo began a feud with the luchador Taichi, centered around Taichi's distaste over Máximo's ring character. The tension rose when Máximo kissed Taichi during a match, resulting in Taichi retaliating by kicking Máximo in the groin. The two met in a Lucha de Apuesta, cabellera vs. cabellera (a wager match: hair vs. hair) on June 6, 2010, which Máximo won two falls to one.



Fig. 67

In the ring Máximo skirts categories of sex, gender and sexuality, rendering them ambiguous. What counts in the world of luchas however, is that he is able to win against an opponent who disapproves of his role. Nevertheless outside the arena the situation looks different. Máximo tells in the short documentary *Máximo*: ‘When they had the Gay Pride [Parade] they invited me but I was like: “What do I have to do there?” I didn’t know what they were going to talk about... but everyone told me: “we were sure that you were also... and what you did in your few television appearances changed people’s perception of gays and homosexuals. You show a different and attractive facet of homosexuality so we would like you to join us.” But I have nothing to do with that.’¹⁴⁶ Máximo applies an appearance and mannerisms that today are usually related to exóticos who have no qualms about displaying their homosexuality in public. By clarifying again and again that he is not homosexual, he maintains a distinction between himself and the exóticos who present themselves as role models. Moreover, to demonstrate solidarity with homosexuals at a gay pride parade was not an option for him. As such, Máximo does not take the chance to be a successful luchador exótico and a role model. A role model who constructs his character, at the level of dress, gesture, performance, etc., as an exótico, throwing into question assumptions about being a man and heterosexual by, for example, not treating heterosexuality and homosexuality as sharply opposed. Outside the arena it might be that Máximo does not want to be confronted with the problems that homosexuals face and prefers to make a definite, inflexible separation between his performances inside the ring and his everyday life.

¹⁴⁶ Cuesta and Huerta, 2006

Translation from Spanish: ‘Cuando hicieron la marcha gay y todo eso, me invitaron, ¿no?, a participar así como ... Bueno, ¿pero cómo? ¿Yo qué tengo que hacer ahí? Yo no sé que puntos vamos a tartar, de qué se va hablar. Pero pues todos me comentaban: “nosotros pensábamos, tenemos la idea y la imagen que tú también... y que... pues tú has hecho con lo poquito, el poquito tiempo que te dan en la televisión y todo eso que la gente te ve en otra forma, de otra forma el gay, homosexual. Lo has hecho algo diferente y es algo atractivo y nos gustaría que nos acompañaras. Pero yo nada que ver...’

His colleague Pimpinela Escarlata, who is overtly homosexual, emphasises that:

As you are a homosexual you will encounter problems anywhere, many people do not accept it. We were in Villahermosa, Tabasco, and we gave advice to the gays there, because many of them, for X problems with their families, at work, or school, were ashamed and went on pretending that they were not gay, but when they see us up in the ring, photographed in magazines and they know about us from the news reports, then it's like they feel that they have more freedom to be themselves...¹⁴⁷

Pimpinela clearly considers being an *exótico* also being a role model. It is important for the *exótico* that homosexuals are not ashamed rather that they expose themselves. Nonetheless, at the end of the 1980s Pimpinela did not start to wrestle as an *exótico* either:

When I started in *lucha libre* I began wrestling as a man [...], but later people figured out that I wasn't a man, because they know, they aren't stupid, 'that's a joto!' they shouted. It made me ashamed, and in order to throw them off the scent, I put on another mask of a man with another name: El Playboy. But sincerely, I couldn't do it, m' hija. So I put away the men's masks [...] and I went out queering (*joteando*) it as an *exótico*.¹⁴⁸



PRINCESA SUGEY
DEBUT 1996

As the mask is gendered for Pimpinela –it is male– and the audience confronted him/her with being a *joto*, Pimpinela had to take it off. In this sense the combination of donning and undoing a mask can be read as a queer act. This act has allowed Pimpinela to go out 'queering (*joteando*) it as an *exótico*.¹⁴⁹ I argue that in a field where the play of masks plays such an important role as in *lucha libre*, Napier's claim

Fig. 68

¹⁴⁷ cited in Fascinetto, 1992, 192

Translation from Spanish: 'Porque eres homosexual en cualquier sitio vas a encontrar problemas, mucha gente no lo acepta. Hemos estado en Villahermosa, Tabasco y hemos aconsejado a los gays, porque muchos de ellos, por equis problemas con la familia, con el trabajo, la escuela, se avergüenzan y andan aparentadno que no los on, pero cuando nos ven arriba del ring, fotografiados en revistas o saben de nosotros por los reportajes, entonces como que se sienten más en libertad de ser...'

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 188

Translation from Spanish: 'Cuando me inicié en la *lucha libre* comencé luchando como hombre [...], pero luego la gente identificó qu yo no era hombre, porque lo sabe, no es tonta "¡ése es joto!" gritaban. Mio dio vergüenza y para despistarla me puse otra máscara de hombre con otro apelativo: el Play Boy, pero sinceramente no pude m'hija. Entonces me retiré de las máscaras de hombre, [...] y ya, salí *joteando*, como *exótico*'

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

that ‘masks [...] testify to an awareness of the ambiguities of appearance and to a tendency toward paradox characteristic of transitional states’¹⁵⁰ is clearly supported.

In the luchas, Pimpinela won several championships: Among them the AAA World Mixed Tag Team Championship together with the luchadora Faby Apache on October 1, 2010, and around 9 months later, on July 31, 2011, Pimpinela defeated seven women to win the AAA Reina de Reinas Championship (AAA's women's championship).¹⁵¹ As such the exótico has proven that it is possible to win in any title be it dedicated to man, woman or mixed teams, complicating these supposedly stable gender categories that these championships come along with. Pimpinela is part of a group of exóticos that identify themselves as cross-gendered or ambiguously gendered, as Casandro indicates:

We don't experience a conflict of being men and women at the same time. We represent a double persona at the same time, so the protagonists one sees in the ring, one sees them in the streets, too.¹⁵²

Through pointing out that it is also possible to be simultaneously a woman and a man in and outside the ring, Casandro differentiates himself from other exóticos (e.g. May Flowers, Máximo) who will assert that they are still men when they leave the arena, by consciously embodying a double persona.

Los exóticos disturb the dominant narrative of lucha libre by putting skill and wit, make-up and queering against size and convention. Consequently, los

¹⁵⁰ Napier, 1986, xxiii

¹⁵¹ The Mexican National Light Heavyweight Championship in 1996, the Mexican National Middleweight Championship in 2001, the AAA World Mixed Tag Team Championship in 2010 and the AAA Reina de Reinas Championship in 2011.

Omar Carrillo, “Resultados 1ro. de octubre – AAA “Héroes Inmortales IV” – Legado AAA, Mesías, Wagner, Aerostar y 187 ganan sus respectivos encuentros” *SuperLuchas Magazine*, 2010, accessed March 12, 2012, <http://superluchas.net/2010/10/02/resultados-1ro-de-octubre---aaa-heroes-inmortales-iv---legado-aaa-mesias-wagner-aerostar-y-187-ganan-sus-respectivos-encuentros/>; Récord, “X-Fly fue rapado en Verano de Escándalo,” 2011, accessed March 12, 2012, <http://www.record.com.mx/luchalibre/2011-07-31/x-fly-fue-rapado-en-verano-de-escandalo-0>.

¹⁵² cited in Fascinetto, 1992, 194

Translation from Spanish: ‘Los Exóticos somos homosexuales y así es el tipo de nuestra lucha. Nosotros no vivimos en conflicto de ser hombres y mujeres a la vez. Representamos un doble personaje al mismo tiempo, pues los protagonistas que ven en el ring, también los ven en las calle.

exóticos offer opportunities to destabilize boundaries and to claim social agency. From their ambiguous position, they become heroes/heroines for their audience. Máximo, Pimpinela and Polvo de Estrellas' changes of roles in their careers also depict the audience's power and influence. Hence, neither the promoters nor the luchadoris easily predict what kind of performances will be accepted, cheered or booed for. When in 2007 a journalist asked if the lucha exótica was in fashion, Polvo de Estrellas clarified that 'No, it's not in fashion, rather I think there are a lot more opportunities and facilities for homosexuals, because of the work done by the activists in their time.'¹⁵³ Through connecting the lucha exótica to the work of activists Polvo de Estrellas makes clear that instead of being a momentary trend –which can change easily– the lucha exótica is one of many opportunities that homosexuals have fought, worked for and achieved, and are willing to maintain. Moreover he points out that 'in fact there are very few people who do not accept us as luchadores exóticos. Most people do, especially women – they accept us more than anyone. The ones who don't accept us are our male colleagues, who certainly do not want to... but the public does. I believe 80% is on our side, so to speak.'¹⁵⁴

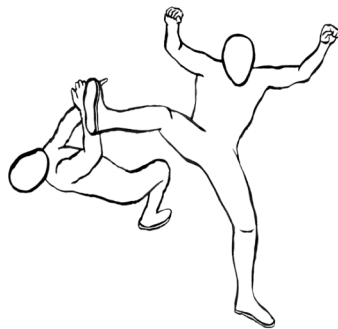


Fig. 69

In this chapter, I have explored how gender is revealed very much in the terms Judith Butler offers: as an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and so the ground of all imitations, a corporeal style of performance, a

¹⁵³ cited in Revista Marvin, "Diversidad Sexual," December 1, 2007, accessed February 2, 2010, http://www.revistamarvin.com/noticia.php?art_id=470.

Translation from Spanish: 'No, no es ninguna moda, más bien creo que ahora hay mucho más oportunidades y facilidades para los homosexuales, debido a la labor que en su tiempo hicieron los activistas.'

¹⁵⁴ Translation from Spanish: 'de hecho hay muy poca la gente que no nos acepta así como luchadoris exóticos. La mayoría de la gente sí, sobre todo las mujeres son las que más nos aceptan más que nada. Los que no nos aceptan son los compañeros que luego no quieren... pero el público sí. Creo que 80% sí está de nuestro lado, por decirlo así.'

Levi (2008, 158-160) makes similar observation when she writes about the luchadori Divino Exotico.

construction.¹⁵⁵ Butler points to the performative and constructed nature of all genders. I argue that the success, the joy and the subversion of the luchas, lies within the very instability of this performative construction. The luchadoris' bodies –of which some offer gender variance and equivocation– disrupt the flow of powers. The luchadoris make gender as practice, (self)representation and performativity, as fictions and as potentialities more evident. All the luchadoris reveal each others' constructions and performances in different ways and these performative acts of gender, I argue, appear explicitly in the ring. It is these complex and explosively contradictory dynamics of performative constructions that inform the contentious ambiguities in lucha libre, rendering it so completely fierce and volatile.

Between approximately 1997 and 2001, exóticos were banned by Televisa.¹⁵⁶ Today it is clear that exóticos and luchadoras get much less airtime than luchadores. To enjoy their luchas I have to go to the arenas. Depending on where they are located and how big they are, the exchange between the audience and the luchadoris, the influence by and participation of the audience differs. This is even more the case when the luchas take place in art museums or the luchadoris travel to other countries.¹⁵⁷ In the following chapter, I explore and question which affective conditions are necessary for the luchas to unfold, for the traces of queer desires to be retained and for what I name here the potential utopias to crystallize.

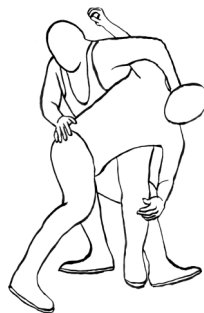


Fig. 70

¹⁵⁵ Butler, 1990, 175-176

¹⁵⁶ Televisa is a Mexican multimedia conglomerate, the largest media company in the Spanish-speaking world. When I approached them to receive more information on the ban I was left with the answer that today exóticos are on television.

¹⁵⁷ For example, Carlos Amoraless' "Amorales Vs. Amorales" at Tate Modern, London and SF MOMA, San Francisco in 2003.

3. Chapter 3: LA TERCERA (THE THIRD) LUCHA In Ne pantla: Kisses and Gestures as Transient Traces of Queer Histories, and Possible Utopias

The luchas specifically demand physical, gestural and/or verbal interaction between the audience and the luchadoris. Spectators reach out to touch them as they enter the arena; luchadoris fall onto whomever is sitting in the front rows; rudis exchange insults with técnicos' supporters, and so on. Luchadoris and audience interact directly with each other even if the arena defines boundaries between them. Novo describes this blurring of the roles in the following way:

Each rheumatic and bald master of a two pesos ticket at ringside loses the kilos and years necessary to transform himself, for a quarter of an hour, into Jimmy el Apolo, and with equal ease, find in El Hombre Montaña or in Alberto Corral his enemies scattered about the world – the landlord, the section chief, his own father-in-law– and so contributes from his seat to exterminate them, to kick them, to throw them out of the ring.¹

It was exactly these contributions from the seats that struck me when I first went to an arena. For me, this is one of its attractions: the way in which the luchas minimize the distance between performers and spectators, constituting both as participants. Performers and spectators project and construct imageries simultaneously, both becoming accomplices in the luchas' secrecy.



Fig. 71

¹ Novo, 1964, 601

Translation from Spanish: 'cada reumático y caivo dueño de un billete de dos pesos en el ring numerado pierde 2 kilos y los años necesarios para transformarse, durante un cuarto de hora, en Jimmy el Apolo, y con igual módica facilidad localiza en el Hombre Montaña o en Alberto Corral a sus enemigos dispersos en el mundo – el casero, el jefe de la sección, su suegro personal! – y contribuye desde su asiento a exterminarlos, a patearlos, a echarlos fuera de las cuerdas.'

In the first chapter, I argued that lucha libre has always been an uncertain space, fissured by difference and held together by contradictory desires and myths that allow an “againsttogether” wrestling of a variety of characters in their multidimensional complexities. In the second chapter I claim that the success, joy and subversion of the luchas are based upon the very instability of the performative construction of gender as the luchadoris do not simply repeat normative notions of gender. In the third chapter, I now set out to make a case for participation, for the creation of a shared field of intersecting subjectivities as central to the space and time of the luchas. In this chapter, I will explore the affective conditions necessary for the luchas to unfold in all its ambiguities and contradictions and ask how the traces of queer desires, as explored in the second chapter, might be retained in these gestures, and how potential utopias might crystallize?

In the following two sections I will take a closer look at the spaces –the arena and the changing rooms– that facilitate the luchas. I explore these spaces in relation to Anzaldúa’s concept of nepantla and Halberstam’s notion of queer space. I will then go on to explore different modes of participation such as sport, albures, gestures and kisses. Lucha libre, as Levi points out, ‘is closely related to the category of sports, but can not be contained by it.’² It is lucha libre’s generic ambiguity, encompassing performance, circus, ritual and melodrama, amongst others, that partly ‘makes it an ideal format for the staging of contradictions.’³ Nevertheless as lucha libre is closely associated with sports and their particular modes of participation, I will take a closer look at this, before I will discuss the albur. Albures imply different connotations in speech when applied by people identified as women or men. This is remarkably evident in the arena. As much as the luchadoris are masters of jumps, llaves and poses, at the centre of their luchas and the audience’s participation lie gestures such as the beso (kiss), giving way to a unique complicity in the arena. Through looking at these modes of participation in the lucha, I will reflect on the proposal of the visual culture theorist José Esteban

² Levi, 2008, 5

³ Ibid., 26

Muñoz, that thinking through gesture might lead to a transient trace of queer histories, and to possible utopias.

3.1 Section 1: LA PRIMERA CAÍDA – THE FIRST FALL The Arena and Its Changing Rooms Facilitating the Luchas



Fig. 72

At a lucha libre event in Iztapalapa, while Polvo de Estrellas and I had gone into the arena through a bulk of people we experienced aggressions towards him: “Fucking faggot, fuck off! Go fuck yourself, fag! Eat shit, faggot!”⁴ In the changing room –which exóticos share with luchadoras– I had the opportunity to film Polvo before the lucha and witness the transformation exóticos undergo. During his transition he was understandably nervous. After the lucha, while removing his make-up, he thanked the referee for his work and shared his view of the audience: “The public was happy. I enjoyed it a lot,”⁵ and commented on their involvement: “what big kissers these men are, right? And from here!” implying his surprise that the men behaved so overtly “gay-ish” despite surroundings that do not seem particularly welcoming to such behavior. “This is a pretty bad neighbourhood...,” explaining to me, “here, precisely, here around the arena, is a really dangerous place, with a lot of crime – isn't it?” he addressed other wrestlers and the referee. “Right here. And the men shouting 'Kiss! Kiss!' ”⁶ He was as surprised as I was about what had just happened during the lucha. As soon as Polvo was in the arena, men

⁴ Translation from Spanish: “¡Pinche puto, chingate! ¡Vete a la chingada, marica! ¡Come mierda, puto!”

⁵ Translation from Spanish: “El publico feliz. Lo disfruté bastante.”

⁶ Translation from Spanish: “Qué besucones están esos hombres, ¿hey? Están aquí, siendo de aquí. Aquí está bien feo es un barrio...” “Aquí precisamente aquí dónde estamos en la arena es un barrio bien peligroso, bien feo. [...] Sí, mucha delincuencia, ¿verdad?” “Aquí. Y los hombres: ¡Beso! ¡Y beso!”

demanded kisses after kisses, and Polvo obliged.

It is in the changing rooms that the luchadoris acquire another identity. They change their names, their clothes, put on make-up, wigs and/or masks, sing, smoke, read, gossip, warm up, and share their emotions. I consider the changing room a space where the luchadoris ideally feel unconstrained in their being and mobility. They are in a transitional state as it is only there where for the moment of un/dressing that identities coincide. Anzaldúa defines such a transitional state as nepantla. Nepantla –within multiple sets of meanings– are liminal, in-between spaces and transitional modes in identity formations: ‘the different stages of acquiring an identity and the process of how one composes one’s identity.’⁷



Fig. 73

As Anzaldúa stated in several interviews, the concept of nepantla is both an expansion and a revision of her theory of The Borderlands.⁸ She provided The Borderlands –twenty one years before Maristany’s invitation, as mentioned in the Introduction– to map the politics of representation of minorities, ‘so they could connect and/or deviate from each other, in agreement[,] in differences’⁹ and/or as “againsttogether.” Through crafting a collage of lyric and prose, myth and autobiography, Spanish, English and Nahuatl, past and present in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa focuses on a specific geographic site: the U.S.-Mexican border, and summarizes The Borderlands as follows:

The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, The Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with

⁷ Anzaldúa, 2009, 241-242

⁸ Anzaldúa, 2000

⁹ Maristany, 2008, 24

intimacy.¹⁰

For Anzaldúa nepantla rather represents temporal, spatial, psychic, and/or intellectual thresholds as they occur during the many transitional stages of life, and describes both identity-related issues and knowledge creation. In this sense, Anzaldúa emphasises the psychic, spiritual and transformational dimensions implicit in *The Borderlands*. ‘Nepantla is a nahuatl term meaning “el lugar entre medio”, el lugar entre medio de todos los lugares, the space in-between.’¹¹ Nepantla, the place amidst all places, stands for forbidden knowledge; new perspectives on reality; alternate ways of thinking. This is where nepantla can be easily affiliated with queerness which has, according to Halberstam, ‘the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space’.¹²

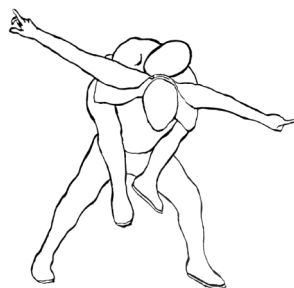


Fig. 74

Queerness in this sense, is something that is ultimately beyond sexual identity and race. Queerness is an attitude, a way of responding, that begins in a place not concerned with, or limited by, notions of national, racial or ethnical belonging nor binary oppositions such as male and female, or the homo versus hetero paradigm that is usually articulated as an extension of this gender binarism. Queerness appears as a mode of articulation, a mode of affiliation and thinking. In her book *In a queer time and place: transgender bodies, subcultural lives* (2005) Halberstam invites us to think about queerness as ‘an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life

¹⁰ Anzaldúa, 2007, 19

¹¹ Ibid., 238

¹² Halberstam, 2005, 2

schedules, and eccentric economic practices'.¹³ Might it be that the potentiality of such an outcome is more likely to take place in nepantla?

In relation to Halberstam's queer space I find the concept of nepantla especially exciting, as it underscores the 'spiritual, psychic, supernatural'¹⁴ connections that also take place:

[N]epantla, a psychological, liminal space between the way things had been and an unknown future. Neptantla is the space in-between, the locus and sign of transition. In nepantla we realize that realities clash, authority figures of the various groups demand contradictory commitments.¹⁵

In the arena, the audience is caught in emotions with different and often contradictory forms of perception, perspectives, views, belief systems, wrestling "againtogether", whilst I would argue, occupying collectively the nepantla space. Some of the luchadoris and people who come "againtogether" in a shared field of intersecting subjectivities might be understood as developing novel logics of location, movement, and identification. I would argue that there is a specificity to the arena which derives from a particular mixture of both wider and more intimate social relations. So, what is going on in the space of an arena?

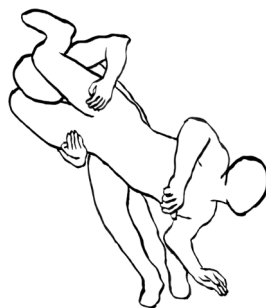


Fig. 75

Firstly, the meeting of technology (cameras, screens, loudspeakers, microphones), bodies, matter, movements, energetic transfers. Secondly, an

¹³ Ibid., 5

¹⁴ Anzaldúa, 2000, 176

¹⁵ Anzaldúa, 2009, 310

intensification of the body's relation to itself that is produced not only by the luchas and its audience but by the bodily ability, willingness and energy given over to the luchas. Thirdly, the luchadoris' and the audience's affective conducts (bodies, words and gestures) take on a distinct intensity in relation to the luchas. Fourthly, there is a potential for anything to happen in the process of these intensive affectivities, a sense of becoming. The very mixture of these points produces effects and affects which would not have happened otherwise. As such, the arenas are the 'space and time that produce, through their most intimate relationship, the dynamic, the atmosphere of [...] lucha libre.'¹⁶

3.2 LA SEGUNDA CAÍDA – THE SECOND FALL Sports, Albuces and Gestures – Different Modes of Participation

During the post-revolutionary period in Mexico the promotion of sports, considered to be a sign of modernity and a tool for its advancement, was closely linked to the state and its objectives of modernization. Sport clearly assisted in this construction of Mexico into modernity.



LADY METAL
1998-99

Fig. 76

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu traces organized sports back to England during the 18th century, where they were initiated by the bourgeoisie and supported by public schools and clubs. At this time, he argues, a transformation of sports' meaning and function took place. From merely popular, folk games, which were generally integrated in social and/or religious feasts, sports shifted from being a pedagogic instrument across classes, into a mass phenomena. In Bourdieu's terminology sport is a field, a site of struggles in which the capacity to impose the legitimate definition of sporting practice and activity such as 'amateurism vs. professionalism, participant sport vs.

¹⁶ Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares, 1992

Translation from Spanish: '[e]spacio y tiempo que en su más íntima relación produce la dinámica, el ambiente, lo que podemos considerar la cultura de la lucha libre.'

spectator sport, distinctive (elite) sport vs. popular (mass) sport' is at stake.¹⁷ Bourdieu points out that 'this field is itself part of the larger field of struggles over the definition of the *legitimate body* and the *legitimate use of the body*'.¹⁸ As discussed in the last chapters, lucha libre was not considered to be a legitimate space/activity for female-bodied people, nor did it seem legitimate for higher classes to attend the arenas.

With the expansion and internationalisation of sports, an organized professional and financial structure was established with the support of the Mexican state from 1876 to 1910. Hence, the state not only recognized the social and societal benefits of sports, but also international competitions as a mode of self-representation and legitimation of a nation abroad.¹⁹ In Mexico during the ruling of dictator Porfirio Díaz from 1876 to 1910 –a period more commonly known as “Porfiriato”– the drive for this modernity came into being. The elites' participation in and the promulgation of sports became a key indication of commitment to the economic and cultural projects of the “Porfiriato”.²⁰ In this sense, the participation in sport contrary to the participation in more traditional popular games, served as an index of identification with the Porfirian projects.²¹ After the revolution, the government established physical education as part of the primary education in Mexico and 'promoted recreational sport through the selective donation of sporting as a form or patronage [...] and as an integral part of local level civic rituals'.²²

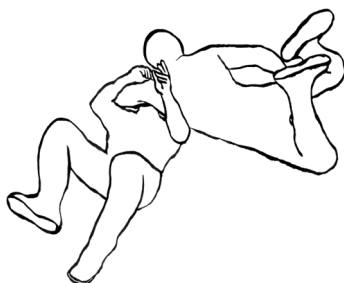


Fig. 77

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, “Sport and Social Class”, *Social Science Information*, 17, 6 (1978): 826.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 831-832

²⁰ Levi, 2008, 10

²¹ *Ibid.*, 11

²² *Ibid.*, 11-12

3.2.1 Lucha Libre Vs. Sports

Since the inception of lucha libre, substantial shifts have occurred in both the lives of luchadoris and Mexican society. Career paths and professional personas, which I have discussed in the last chapters, reveal much about individual responses to these changes. Luchadoris are athletes for whom training, practice, and discipline are integral. They identify with sporting ideals, and, as explored in the previous chapters, they cultivate and display their bodies, harnessing the physical and trained power of luchadoris, although they are not subject to the linearity of sports' rules. In order to distinguish modern sports from games, rituals and other similar practices the sports historian Allen Guttman characterized seven features: (1) Secularism (2) Equality of opportunity to compete and in the conditions of competition (3) Specialization of roles (4) Rationalization (5) Bureaucratic organization (6) Quantification (7) The quest for records.²³



Fig. 78

Following Guttman's features, it is possible to point out that: lucha libre is non-religious – although within it many catholic references are made and can be found. When luchadoris meet each other in the ring an equality is supposedly granted. There is no fixed specialization of roles except for the distinction between técnicos and rudis – the latter of whom is expected to break the rules of lucha libre. There are two kinds of rules: 'rules that the audience is explicitly supposed to know, and rules that are not supposed to be recognized as such.'²⁴ Lucha libre is organized by private enterprises which are controlled by state supervision such as the Comisión de Lucha Libre Profesional (Professional Wrestling Commission) that operates in all federal states.²⁵ The enterprise keeps records of their champions and of important luchas but in

²³ Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978)

²⁴ Levi, 2008, 15

²⁵ Since lucha libre's beginning in 1933 it has been under federal supervisions of Comisiones de Box y Lucha Libre Profesional (Professional Boxing and Wrestling Commissions). Since 1993 boxing and lucha libre have their own commissions in Mexico City.

general there is little interest in quantification. Their records include information on championships, who lost their mask or hair against whom and how many times someone won a mask or hair. These are not the kind of records however, that are meant to be broken. When confronted with Guttman's model, we can conclude that lucha libre 'both is and is not a sport.'²⁶

Over time sport has increasingly been converted into a mass phenomena where specifically popular sporting spectacles, such as football fulfil the place of spectacle, as Bourdieu points out:

[S]port, born of truly popular games, i.e. games produced by the people, returns to the people, like 'folk music', in the form of spectacles produced for the people. We may consider that sport as a spectacle would appear more clearly as a mass commodity, and the organization of sporting entertainments as one branch among others of show business [...], if the value collectively bestowed on practising sports (especially now that sports contests have become a measure of relative national strength and hence a political objective) did not help to mask the divorce between practice and consumption and consequently the functions of simple passive consumption.²⁷

Bourdieu criticises the passive consumption of the audience that, according to him, is only able to participate imaginarily. This passive consumption functions as a compensation for capacities that are substitutionally carried out by experts, the professional athletes, rather than the audience itself. I suggest that it is necessary to take a closer, more differentiated, look at the participation of the audience. The sociologists Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning's emphasis on the affective experience of sports allows a more specific exploration of this aspect of the audience's participation.

Without considering the spaces that are temporarily turned into arenas, there are around 187 arenas in Mexico nowadays. As I have explored so far, these

²⁶ Levi, 2008, 26

²⁷ Bourdieu, 1978, 828

are spaces 'for the production and expression of affective excitement.'²⁸

According to Elias and Dunning's account, modern civilization demands restraints on instinctive and affective experience, a process of repression and sublimation, which Elias calls the "civilizing process".²⁹

Social survival and success [...] depend [...] on a reliable armour, not too strong and not too weak, of individual self-restraint. [...] To see grown-up men and women shaken by tears and abandon themselves to their bitter sorrow in public [...] has ceased to be regarded as normal. It is usually a matter of embarrassment for the onlooker and often a matter of shame or regret for those who have allowed themselves to be carried away by their excitement.³⁰

Emotion may be strongly felt, but it should be rendered invisible, private, personal. What is at stake here is the emotions spectacular display: 'We do not stop feeling. We only prevent or delay our acting in accordance with it.'³¹

Sports, Elias argues, must somehow reconcile two contradictory functions: 'the pleasurable de-controlling of human feelings, the full evocation of and enjoyable excitement on the one hand and on the other, the maintenance of a set of checks to keep the pleasantly de-controlled emotions under control.'³²

Importantly, Elias and Dunning point out that the "civilizing process" began with the aristocracy, with merchants wanting access to social and economic power, and with servants who had to be discreet regarding parts of their masters' lives. These class distinctions, Elias and Dunning argue, still appear in different forms of legitimated emotional expressions for the bourgeois at classical concert halls and for the working-class audiences at sporting events. At classical concerts the audience is 'moved without moving'³³ and at sport events the audience has 'a far greater scope for conveying their feelings to each other and to the players by means of movements, including those of

²⁸ Norbert Elias, Introduction to *The Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, by Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 49

²⁹ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000)

³⁰ Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *The Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 64-65

³¹ Elias and Dunning, 1986, 111

³² Elias, 1986, 49

³³ Elias and Dunning, 1986, 50

tongue, lips and vocal cords.³⁴ The degree of emotional expressions separate upper-classes from lower-classes: minimal, controlled expressions vs. overt emotional display.

In sports, spectators respond actively to the performance, cheering their heroes and booing their opponents. Lucha libre intensifies the affective dimension offered by sports and directs it toward a space where even the moral order of *rudi* and *técniqui* cannot be trusted anymore. It is not about who possesses more masks or the championship. There is something else at stake. In the arena a shared, collective, emotional experience is possible, one that may reassert the desire of affective coming together and the power of a temporary community. In lucha libre the audience's participation is even more intense as they incorporate themselves "againsttogether" in what is going on and with lucha libre's rules. Generally they know what is permitted and what is prohibited. In the arena the audience, rather than simply passively consuming, takes on an active role in recognizing cheating. By shouting and gesturing they interfere and attempt to call upon the referee's attention to the violation of the rule(s). However, the referees, too, can be *técniquis* or *rudis*. Similar to carnivalesque time 'certain norms and prohibitions of usual life' are momentarily suspended to create 'a special type of communication impossible in everyday life [which leads] to the creation of special forms of [...] speech and gesture'.³⁵ Even though there are footlights in the arena and 'the scene is strictly limited by time, the time of the [lucha], there [is ...] no separation of participants and spectators. Everybody participates. While the usual world order is suspended,' the luchas through their "againsttogether" invoke both competition and complicity, whether between the luchadoris, the audience or the referees.³⁶

Once I joined a group to the luchas in the northern city of Tijuana. We sat quite close to the ring, where the local luchadoris had opened the night. Their

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Bakhtin, 1984, 15 and 10

³⁶ Ibid., 265

match did not last long and soon after two 10 year-old boys entered the ring. The audience responded hugely to them. I learned that it was the first time they had wrestled in a ring, before that night they had been wrestling at traffic intersections across Tijuana to entertain drivers, earning a few pesos. The women around me got louder and louder and had soon chosen a favourite between the two – to their great joy he subsequently won. I was impressed by their choreography, elegance, flexibility and collaboration. The next two matches were not met with much approval and so the majority of the audience did not pay much attention; a few booed. But then the two stars of the night Dr. Wagner vs. Místico hoisted themselves over the ropes. From one moment to the next, the whole atmosphere had changed. Women around me would not stop screaming: ¡Místico! ¡Místico!; ¡Místico, házme un hijo! (Místico, make me a kid!); ¡Místico, te quiero! (Místico, I love you!). I was surprised at how directly and loudly they had played their desires out. This luchador and his movements invited to play “againsttogether” a desire for another and a desire to be another for the length of the lucha.

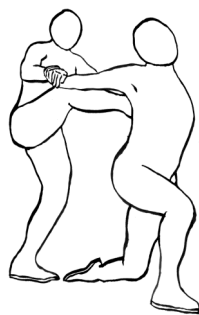


Fig. 79

In these scenes I am caught up “againsttogether” the projection of affects, fantasies, meanings, desires, and also the complicities that are produced in this shared field of intersecting subjectivities. I propose that contradictions are wrestled “againsttogether” by the luchadoris and the audience alike. Women, men, elderly people and children from different circles of society come to the luchas leaving their prescribed domestic or employment duties behind. They express emotion and desire –which they know exactly how to perform– and know exactly how far they can take them in relation to the rest of the audience

and the luchadoris. In other words, the audience playfully and consciously performs the role of an audience. Rather than being just a background dedicated to passive consumption, they are conscious about their role cultivating a more active participation.

The audience masks itself as audience to complicitly participate in the body of the audience in which the body becomes another body, while simultaneously playing with what it means to be in a body, with others. Secrecy plays an important and complex role in lucha libre both for the luchadoris and the audience. As much as it is known that the goal is not to knock the opponents out but to entertain, to put on a show, to wrestle in a spectacular way, neither the luchadoris nor the audience directly address what the goal actually is. Rendering opponents immobilized, helpless, and sometimes even ridiculous, may be part of the lucha, but it is not the driving force nor the objective, even though it will be discussed as if it is. This form of secrecy and its complicity facilitates and extends the element of surprise in the arena. We all participate in keeping the uncertainty alive. It is these complex and explosively contradictory dynamics that produce the ambiguities of the lucha libre, rendering it so fierce and volatile.



Fig. 80

These images (Fig. 80) are stills from the recordings of a lucha libre event in Iztapalapa. They depict one audience member kissing Polvo and another dancing in the middle of the ring. In the small break before the third and last caída, the audience demands once again beeesooos (kiiisseees) and even more beeesooos. Besides kissing, Polvo takes off the shirt of a man in the

audience, who proudly shows his muscular torso. One of Polvo's team partners, the exótico Yuriko, asks to the audience: ¿¡Que me baile!?! (Should he dance for me!?) The public reacts with screaming enthusiasm and a moment later the man jumps over the blue fence that marks the area between the ring and the audience. Yuriko takes a folding chair from the audience's row, throws it into the ring while someone demands music. At the moment the song starts Yuriko sits down on the chair in excited anticipation, the man starts to shake his hips. The audience screams loudly. The music plays *Marica tú* and the man is about to let down his jeans when Yuriko grabs his chest and smacks his butt. But as if this is not already enough for the excitement of the luchadoris, the referee and the audience, the man jumps on top of Yuriko landing with legs akimbo on Yuriko's lap. This is the moment that the other luchadoris take advantage of, throwing Yuriko on the canvas and the guy off the ring to finally start the last caída. The audience applauds for this interlude and I am completely taken by surprise. I had not expected anything like this, especially –as pointed out before– since most of the crowd had addressed Polvo aggressively when we entered the arena. As I was close behind him, our bodies almost turned into one body snaking through a sea of bodies, their comments and emotions addressed us both almost as one.



Fig. 81

Sports invoke emotional identifications, yet, as mentioned before, the luchas create more than this: a space full of force and vulnerability. In the arenas fantasies in which the body becomes another body are triggered, at the same time playing with what it means to be in a body with others. The encounter of at least two bodies is presented in all its unknown potentiality. The wrestling bodies, exploring the nature of movements, are more frequently predicated on the creation of a subjective field of experience than of separating subjects. In the process of participation the “againsttogether” positioning of the luchadoris and the audience is an important one defining the space in-between as this shared field of intersecting subjectivities.

The possibility of “againsttogether” is met not only in the ring but also in the arena where strange new social formations may take shape: communities without fixed identities, rather multi-causal, multi-directional, liminal identities. The luchadoris and the audience ‘work with the interface between the different realities’.³⁷ Furthermore, the nepantla space as ‘the stage or stage between the identity that’s in place and the identity in progress but not yet formed’³⁸ makes it possible to interact, to engage, to challenge, and to actively transform codes. A politics of affect underscores subject positionings that are seemingly irreconcilable. These in-between identities, even if only for the length of the lucha, may passionately celebrate an energy that leads to an exchange of gestures that communicate the impossibilities and potentials of communication and reciprocity. Rather than producing an insurmountable distance, the luchas deploy a moment of vulnerability where the relationship to others and the broader social field is highlighted – in all of its conflicts and contradictions. In this broader social field wordplays such as the albur play an important part.

3.2.2 The Luchas as Albur Vs. The Albur as a Trigger for Participation

Even though officially forbidden, the luchas do not take place exclusively within the ring. The luchadoris get thrown off, jump from or leave the ring and often find themselves in the front row. Whenever this happens the luchadoris and the audience interact directly with each other even if the arena defines spatial boundaries between them. These are the moments of special joy and/or arousal for the audience. Challenging the luchadoris with or without albures is an important part of the audience’s participation. Levi points out, that one way to look at the luchas is ‘a visual, physical albur.’³⁹ Furthermore, Novo compares the luchas to a sexual act:

Naked of clothes like in preludes and of supporting characters,

³⁷ Ibid., 176

³⁸ Anzaldúa, 2000, 177-178

³⁹ Levi, 2008, 145

the villain and the hero stage the "climax" as soon as the referee raises the curtain -or turn off the light- following their cryptic instructions and their secret warnings to the opponents. Let the fight begin, the rules of honour are absent –as in real life [...]– the shoving, the holds, the limits, the sit-downs that appropriate those two [...] inside the ropes that aren't the limit of their activity, as they tend to pass through like arrows when the other makes a pass to his charge, and will fall at the feet of the astonished spectators in the front row.⁴⁰

The albur (pun) is a Mexican form of wordplay in which one of the possible meanings carries sexual undertones. These are commonly used among groups of predominately male friends. Albur is also a form of comedy: Many artists and comedians, including Alberto Rojas "El Caballo", Polo Polo (both actors of the *ficheras* genre, see Chapter 2) and others are known for their skills at performing albures (alburrear). As such, the albur is among the most emblematic oral traditions of popular culture in Mexico. The writer Jorge Mejía Prieto explains:

[T]his is exactly what the alburero expert does with the words: to turn them over, to change the meaning, to distort the intention, to create them again, to explode them so that the partners receive the blow and swallow all their retorts or rejections. [...] The language of the albur is allegorical and bristling with secret blessing. In it, the character is male aggression, sexually and symbolically, and the female element is converted, also symbolically, in a passive object of use and abuse.⁴¹

It is remarkable how saturated the culture of the albur is with references to homosexuality. In popular culture the sexual and gender transgressions of the macho are a constant source of pleasure, fun and mockery, as for example

⁴⁰ Novo, 1964, 598

Translation from Spanish: 'Desnudos de ropa como de situaciones preliminares y de personajes secundarios, el villano y el héroe ponen en escena el "climax" en cuanto el referee levanta el telón –o apaga la luz- de sus crípticas instrucciones y de sus secretas advertencias a los contrincantes. Iniciado el encuentro, las reglas del honor se hallan ausentes –como en la vida real [...]– de los empujones, las llaves, los topes, los sentones que se propinan aquellos dos caballeros dentro de las cuerdas que no son tampoco el límite de su actividad, ya que suelen atravesarlas lanzados como flechas cuando el otro da un pase a su embestida, y van a caer a los pies de los asombrados espectadores de la primera fila.'

⁴¹ Jorge, Mejía Prieto, *Albures y refranes de México* (México D.F.: Panorama Editorial, 1985), 11

Translation from Spanish: 'Eso es exactamente lo que hace el alburero experto con las palabras: darles la vuelta, modificarles el significado, torcerles la intención, hacerlas de nuevo, estallarlas para que los interlocutores reciban el golpe y se traguen todas sus réplicas o rechazos. [...] El lenguaje de los albures es alegórico, secreto y erizado de filos. En él la agresión es de carácter masculino, simbólico y sexual; y el elemento femenino se ve convertido, de manera también simbólica, en objeto pasivo de uso y abuso.'

the proverb “macho probado es macho calado” (a proven macho is a penetrated macho) shows. I would argue that the albur provides a way to examine how popular culture accommodates and produces *both* homosocial and homoerotic expressions. As one would expect, it is mainly the rudis and exóticos who use albures as a trigger to arouse the audience or to provoke their opponents. As women and “effeminate” men play a crucial role in the language and are a focus of albures, some of the luchadoras and exóticos also use them. When women and “effeminate” men who are generally considered to be the ones who are penetrated during a sexual act are addressed with albures, but are able to answer back in the same line, the situation becomes more complex. In this case the albureado suffers a double humiliation since he would not be able to fend off the albur, and he would have been albureado by a woman or an “effeminate” man. Nevertheless, as much as albures are applied to keep alert the addressees, there is also a power position at stake. Vulnerability is not desired in the course of albures. Rather, the goal is to expose the albureado as the one who is vulnerable.

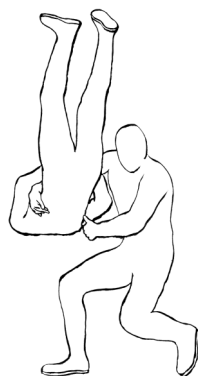


Fig. 82

It took me quite some time to partially understand albures and even longer to react with my own. Nonetheless, I wonder if I will ever be able to grasp all their nuances and implications. Without a doubt to visibly not understand what is being said –and to make this clear in the exchange– can be a powerful counter too, but in situations when I am albureada, I feel especially vulnerable. The arena can be a space to listen and to practice –if desired– these luchas of words in a playful way. As stated before, Levi considers that

one way to look at the luchas is ‘as a visual, physical albur’⁴² and Novo compares them to a sexual act. However, the objectives of an albur and of a sexual act are quite different. I would contend that sexual acts are –ideally– carried out with the agreement of everyone involved to experience joy, fun, arousal, excitement, release, satisfaction in all the multiple ways to accomplish them. I will develop this idea in relationship to the example of a kiss as a gesture in the following section. The lucha could be read as an albur if we only focus on the “against” of the luchadoris in the ring. However, if we do so, we lose sight of the Vs, that is, the fact that the luchadoris and the audience apply an “againsttogether” to make the lucha happen. This is what is required for everyone to leave satisfied and, what is important in the field of lucha libre, to come back to the arenas for more fights and keep following them.

3.2.3 Besos (Kisses) as Gestures All Over the Place

In 2009 I went to a lucha where the team composed of the luchadoris Billy Boy, Sexy Star, Polvo de Estrellas, and Mini Histeria faced Mascarita Sagrada, Fabi Apache, Gato Eveready, and Pimpinela Escarlata. In the middle of a lucha the exótico técnico Pimpinela squares off against Mini Histeria and with dramatic gestures chases after him, driving him off the ring. ¡Beeesoooo! ¡Beeesoooo! (Kiss! Kiss!) the audience screams. Pimpinela is outside the ring and kisses a security guy ¡Otroooo, otroooo! (Another one! Another one!) Disgusted, he wipes off the kiss with his hand, but at the same time giggles about it as much as the audience does. In the ring Faby and the exótico rudo Polvo face each other. The other luchadoris rally the crowd: ¡Faaaaabbbyyy! ¡Poooooollvooooooo! ¡Faaabbbyyy! Polvo loses the fight, but as Billy Boy enters Faby is prepared. She bounces off the ropes to slap him across the chest with the back of her hand and drives him out of the ring again. ¡Faaaaabbbyyy! ¡Faaaaabbbyyy! ¡Faaaaabbbyyy! is heard from everywhere. This is too much for Pimpinela who runs into the ring, shaking his

⁴² Levi, 2008, 145

hips to also ask for applause. But Polvo and Billy Boy quickly interrupt the exótico, grabbing him and tossing her around. Pimpinela escapes, climbing the ropes to jump on top of Mini Histeria, hugging and kissing him at the same time. ¡Beeesoooo! ¡Puuutoooo! ¡Arriba los maricones! ¡Dale maricón! (Hooray for the fags! Let him have it, fag!) Mini Histeria frees himself to leave the ring, only to realize that Pimpinela had been faster and as he turns to the audience, he receives a passionate kiss. Without a doubt Pimpinela is satisfied and the audience too.⁴³



Fig. 83

As my description shows, within the luchas' course of action the beso plays a complex role – a provocative “againsttogether” desire. I would even go so far as to consider it as part of the llaves' repertoire. However, there lies an important difference between a llave and a beso: a gesture can be intentional but, unlike a pose, it is not by definition put on or faked. Therefore, unlike a llave, it is not directly used to defeat an opponent, but might be applied to distract and/or to provoke. I find the beso particularly exciting in a field whose success and appeal is granted through the luchadoris' poses and masterfully applied jumps and llaves. Centrally important to the luchas and to the audience's participation, I argue, are gestures such as the beso.

Gesture derives from the Latin verb *gerere*: to carry, act or do. It is produced when language, image, and social norms intersect with the individual uses and habitations of the body. Affects that might not have precise, codified or translatable meanings are embodied by gesture. As it is culturally informed without having a strict semantic order, a gesture is a practice in the space between code and instinct, body and language, image and word. This is where the paradox of gestures can be found: the mixture of the affective and the sensorial, the bodily and the discursive.⁴⁴ Gesture has thus multiple and

⁴³ This part was previously published in Nina Höchtl, “UNA LUCHA MIXTA – ¡Ándaleeeee! (Go for it!),” *Natural Selection Issue #7* (2010): 28.2 <http://naturalselection.org.nz/s/7.28_Nina_Hoechtl.pdf> (June 4, 2011)

⁴⁴ Esther Gabara, “Gestures, Practices, and Projects: [Latin] American Re-visions of Visual Culture and Performance

sometimes conflicting meanings and it is conceived as:

[M]ovement intimately and exclusively related to the body and its expressiveness (phenomenology); as conventionalized movement belonging to a system of signification imposed by culture upon the body (semiotics, linguistics, and rhetoric); as movement situated within operating chains responsible for producing knowledge, culture, and even types of consciousness (anthropology, paleontology, and Marxism); and as movement that is not exclusively related to the body but generated instead by any apparatus –including the body understood *as* apparatus–capable of being displaced in space (deconstruction and new media studies).⁴⁵

Gestures operate at the limits of body and code. They also make possible subtle performances emerging from their paradoxical state: being simulatenously the ‘locus and sign of transition’.⁴⁶ Through the performance of gestures bodies take on identities. Gestures can be simultaneously communicative, experiential, instrumental, bodily, aesthetic and contextual. ‘[G]estures have to be considered as *events*, singular performances,’ according to literary theorist Carrie Noland, events ‘that draw to be sure, on culture-specific (as well as gender-, race-, sexuality-, and class specific) conventional vocabularies but *are never performed twice exactly the same way*.’⁴⁷ Even though they are never repeated alike, the repetition remains central to the gestural formation. It makes gestures recognizable and produces meaningful forms of communication. As we have seen with the example of the macho, repetitions may point towards the incoherence of such ‘culture-specific [...] conventional vocabularies’.⁴⁸ The very interesting point of gesture is, I argue, its paradox: gestures are natural vs. codified vs. innate vs. conventional vs. culturally specific vs. universal. But does the gesture’s internal paradox hold the potential to ground utopias?

Studies,” *E-Misférica* 7.1 *Unsettling Visuality* Summer 2010, <<http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e-misferica-71/gabara>> (November 25, 2011)

⁴⁵ Carrie Noland, introduction to *Migrations of gesture* by Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Ness (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) xi

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Noland, 2008, xxiv

⁴⁸ Ibid.

In 2011, before she left to Japan for a three-month tour from August to November, La Comandante appeared with the group La Fuerza TRT (The TRT Power) composed of the luchadores Damián El Terrible, Rey Bucanero and El Hijo del Texano. Unfortunately, in contrast to the role she embodies when wrestling on her own, La Comandante's role with La Fuerza TRT was limited. She cheers for the group and only fights their opponents when they leave the ring. On Friday, February 25, 2011, she accompanied Héctor Garza, Terrible and Texano as they had to fight Super Porky, Máximo and Toscano. The side story of that evening was that La Comandante seemed to fall for Toscano, who appears in the ring in white pants with prints of red kiss-lips and red lipstick kisses all over his body. He thus begs for even more kisses to render his body invisible under all the lipstick traces. Besides the kisses that Máximo gives to his opponents, which the audience was also cheering for, La Comandante caught Toscano outside the ring and forcefully kissed him. Performing thus for everyone a beso resembling the lipstick traces on his body, something many people may have liked to carry out themselves. The team of Super Porky, Máximo and Toscano, however, won the match and the audience did not demand another beso from La Comandante and Toscano.



Fig. 84

It certainly matters where, when, and by whom the beso is done. The support of the audience as an emotional state also comes into being for the execution of the beso. Each time and place the kiss triggers a different reception and it may be experienced in a different way. The beso has the capacity to simultaneously disturb and unite, applying an “againsttogether”. It might have upset the one who received a beso and/or the audience, but at the same time it united the kissers – and maybe even the audience with them. However, the beso as a performed gesture has the capacity to move the audience in all senses as it is embedded in personal and/or collective desires. The kiss as a gesture and a ritual maps a space that one can perform, where one knows what is going on: When you introduce yourself, what do you do? Among other possibilities, do you bow, shake hands, or do you give one, two, three or even four kisses? In

this sense, the kiss represents but also constructs ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and class. On the one hand, gestures are vulnerable to blurring, transformation or even extinction, and on the other, they might be transferred from one generation to the next. Muñoz contends that gestures ‘transmit ephemeral knowledge of lost queer histories’.⁴⁹ As queerness, according to Muñoz, is hardly evidenced, proven and read by traditional historical facts, it is rather done ‘by saturating it to the concept of ephemera.’⁵⁰ Ephemeral evidence is not eye-catching, it is not explicit, it is ‘the remains that are often embedded in queer acts, [...] and [in] communicative physical gestures’⁵¹ such as the confident hand wave of Martha Villalobos, or the ankle’s position after Máximo’s pirouette. These gestures perform entries to traces of queer histories. Some of the exóticos’ gestures, I propose and as explored in the second chapter, allude to the prequeer and loca’s historical becoming in Mexico.

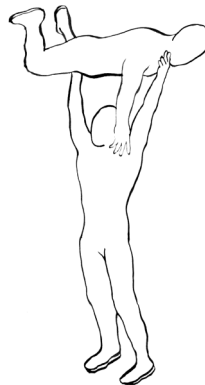


Fig. 85

As much as gestures transform the bodies that perform them, kisses transform the kissers. However, there can also be an “againsttogether” of what the gesture makes us feel and what it means. ‘[O]n the one hand, gesturing can performatively bring a body into being,’ as Noland points out, ‘on the other, the performing body can critically bring a gesture into being, one that draws from the body’s ability to differentiate, swerve, and remark.’⁵² In the play

⁴⁹ Muñoz, 2009, 67

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 65

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Carrie Noland, *Agency and embodiment: performing gestures/producing culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009) 212

Troilus and Cressida by Shakespeare, Cressida asks: 'In kissing do you render or receive?'⁵³ An answer only the kissers can provide. I argue here that the space of rendering and receiving is crucial in the *luchas*. The beso differentiates, swerves, and remarks spanning time and place. Kissing blurs the distinctions between giving and taking, receiving and rendering, responding and reacting. The kiss stands for reciprocity, but one that is also unprecedented developmentally, since it includes tasting someone else's mouth, skin, history and future. The kiss is the moment where different histories touch or mingle "againsttogether", creating a temporal chaos in the key of desire. In this sense, during kissing, the subject is devoured by caressing, it is eaten without being swallowed, rather sustaining the subject's presence and future. The kiss requests a unity of those kissing without abolishing them into sameness. In this sense the kiss might stand for a more general principle that I consider very important: we are all different but at the same time equal. This is a constant contradiction we have to fight for: to dissolve the differences but simultaneously to take them into account. To work with the very spaces in which difference must be addressed –the spaces and politics of everyday life, where identities, and the histories that subtend them, are reproduced. Those who kiss embody the entanglement of rendering and receiving, of response and reaction, of giving and taking.

In his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz argues that 'gesture interrupts the normative flow of time and movement'⁵⁴ and later on states that '[it] is utopian'.⁵⁵ Muñoz primarily traces gestures and movements that disrupt 'the coercive choreography of a here and now that is scored to naturalize and validate dominant cultural logics such as capitalism and heterosexuality'.⁵⁶ In this sense he focuses on embodied practices that interfere in the capitalist and heterosexual here and now with normalized rhythms, speeds or paces. Muñoz, drawing on philosopher Ernst Bloch's crucial concepts of the "no longer conscious" and the "not yet" of utopia as

⁵³ William Shakespeare, "Troilus and Cressida," 1602, http://shakespeare.mit.edu/troilus_cressida/troilus_cressida.4.5.html (November 23, 2011)

⁵⁴ Muñoz, 2009, 91

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 65

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 162

“anticipatory consciousness” discussed in *The Principle of Hope*, opens his book with the following words: ‘Queerness is not yet here. [...] Queerness is also a performance because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future.’⁵⁷ In this sense, nepantla, as ‘a psychological, liminal space between the way things had been and an unknown future’⁵⁸ is also related to gesture.

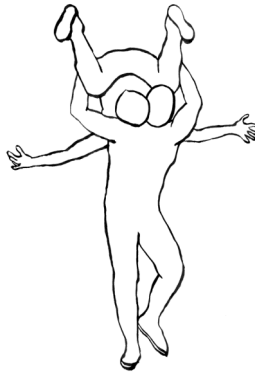


Fig. 86

Alongside Anzaldúa and Halberstam, Muñoz describes a queerness that is ‘more than just sexuality. It is this great refusal of a performance principle that allows the human to feel and know not only our work and our pleasure but also our selves and others.’⁵⁹ Consequently, throughout his book, Muñoz places particular emphasis on performances that interrupt forms of enactment that are routinized and instrumental in both work and leisure – what the philosopher and social critic Herbert Marcuse called the performance principle in *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*.⁶⁰ The gesture, according to Muñoz, has the capacity to interrupt this principle as it:

[I]s not the coherence or totality of movement. Gesture for Giorgio Agamben is exemplary of the politics of a “means without ends.” The gestural exists as an idealist manifestation and not as a monolithic act directed toward an “end”: “What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but something is being endured and supported.”⁶¹

Muñoz, following Agamben, points towards the internal paradox of gestures:

⁵⁷ Ernst Bloch, 1959, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996)

Muñoz, 2009, 1

⁵⁸ Anzaldúa, 2009, 310

⁵⁹ Muñoz, 2009, 135

⁶⁰ Herbert Marcuse, 1955, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966)

⁶¹ Muñoz, 2009, 91

that even though ‘nothing is being produced or acted [...] something is being endured and supported.’⁶² This something of a gesture –relating it back to Bloch’s concept– allows a glimpse or trace of an “againtogether” of the “no longer conscious” and the “not yet” of utopia as “anticipatory consciousness.” As the ‘[g]esture signals a refusal of a certain kind of finitude’⁶³, Muñoz argues, ‘[it] is utopian’.⁶⁴ Following his argumentation, and Halberstam’s invitation to think about queerness as ‘an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices’⁶⁵ I consider the kiss such a gestural interruption, as a queerness towards potential utopias.

If only for the length of a *lucha*, the arena is also filled with the audience’s laughter, their “ándales”, “órales”, “híjoles” and “wows” – speech acts that perform their participation. In *Rabelais and his World*, Mikhail Bakhtin explores the festive –carnavalesque– laughter that takes place during carnival situated in popular non-official spaces such as the marketplace.⁶⁶ Nothing is fixed in Bakhtin’s carnival world and everything is in a state of becoming, making room for a multiplicity of voices and meanings as the borderline between actors and spectators is blurred. According to Bakhtin carnival is a utopian world of renewal, festivity and laughter.⁶⁷ Through laughter, ‘the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint. [...] Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter.’⁶⁸ It is the perspective that laughter brings which interests Bakhtin, and that laughter is able to join oppositions. Laughter emphasizes the forms of relationship rather than the elements within the relationship, which are often reduced to one-sided and simple meanings: ‘Laughter [...] overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations’⁶⁹ and as such it has a utopian character.⁷⁰

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 162

⁶⁴ Ibid., 65

⁶⁵ Ibid., 5

⁶⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984)

⁶⁷ Bakhtin, 1984, 9

⁶⁸ Ibid., 66

⁶⁹ Ibid., 90

⁷⁰ Ibid., 12



Fig. 87

Muñoz, although not referring to Bakhtin, argues that Andy Warhol's speech acts such as "wow" and "gee" are 'manifestation[s] of the utopian feeling that is integral to much of Warhol's art, speech and writing.'⁷¹ These 'liking of things', rather than being part of Warhol's repertoire of self 'often described as insincere performance of naiveté', play out 'as a mode of utopian feeling but also as hope's methodology [...], which is manifest in what Bloch described as a form of "astonished contemplation".⁷² Muñoz sees such a contemplation, for example, in the work by Warhol, in which he glamorizes the being of Liz Taylor in ways that postpone the darkness of reality: 'Astonishment helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time and place. Much of [the] artists' work performs this astonishment in the world' and the "wows" and "gees" are part of the act to perform it.⁷³

I would consider this argument stronger if on the one hand it considered the particular circumstances during which the "wees" and "gees" were performed and on the other hand discussed Bakhtin's carnivalesque laughter. The carnivalesque laughter, rather than being an individual reaction, 'is the laughter of all the people [...] that is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants.'⁷⁴ It is ambivalent, gay, intoxicating, infectious, mocking and taunting as 'it is also directed at those who laugh.'⁷⁵ The carnivalesque laughter differentiates itself from the one of, for example, satirists, who 'place [themselves] above the object of [their] mockery, [they are] opposed to it.'⁷⁶ The utopian character of the carnivalesque laughter can be found in the "againtogether" of the ones who are laughing and the realm they are laughing about. As much as "wows" and "gees" the laughter is felt intimately but it also constructs and destabilizes. I argue that laughter and speech acts such as "órales" or "wows" burst out from a collective body, but their most

⁷¹ Muñoz, 2009, 5

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Bakhtin, 1984, 12

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

important process happens internally: the body's life and liveliness, and its relationship to and within the world intersect with internal processes of emotion, affection, perception, thinking, and speaking. Following from this, what if we think of the audience's laughter, their "ándaes", "órales", "híjoles" and "wows" in the arena as a transfer to, or a mode of, a utopian feeling? Could we not conceive that the luchas retain a utopian feeling that is triggered and announced perhaps as much as in a scream or grunt as in a gesture such as the beso?

The beso is hardly televised as the cameras are neither interested in registering it nor in granting it a close-up. To appreciate this gesture you have to be part of the audience. Through the kiss, the luchadoris reach out directly to the audience's experience and collaborate with them. Embodying this gesture the luchadoris allow us to receive the kiss in its multiple dimensions, as spatial change, intensity, interrupting our expectations. In the arena and in the ring the beso is demanded, fought over, received and rendered. The moment of kissing happens in a space "againsttogether" intimacy, affection, appearance, danger and safety. The kisses might be considered a threat or a promise. It might be the case though that if the besos were to be prolonged, utopias would crystallize right there in the middle of everyone.

4. Conclusions Not-Yet

Throughout this thesis I have attempted to set the luchas in motion exploring them through a diverse range of means – from visiting arenas, doing interviews, inventing a lucha libre character and organizing a lucha match to analyzing texts, interviews, photographs and theoretical concepts. During writing I was concerned with the “againsttogether” of two efforts: one focused on engaging the analytical work necessary to make connections, illustrate characters and draw –however tentatively and confined– conclusions about the information, materials and experiences I had gathered; the other including parts of interviews, materials and descriptions long enough to grant the luchas, the luchadoris, and the artworks, their spaces, experiences, and visions. To honor the richness of the latter and to honor you –the readers’– expectations to offer a critical, analytical, and interpretive framework in order to bring out new insights, knowledge and understanding of the play of masks, the roles of genders, the participation of the audience, and gesture as being utopian and a transient trace of queer histories throughout lucha libre. It is this “againsttogether” that I push forward in this thesis.

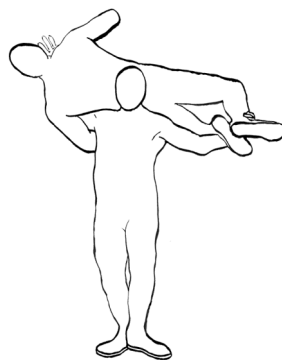


Fig. 88

In the first chapter, I set out to discuss the discourses of mexicanidad, mestizaje, and indigenismo, which are frequently used to talk about Mexico and that can in turn be considered as masks to mask differences. By explaining the deployment of the mask in Mesoamerica, and its relevance within the luchas, I took a closer look at the mask as a means to relate to the

above-mentioned discourses. With the help of masks, make-up and/or costumes, the luchadoris change into a variety of characters when entering the ring. The deployment of masks –their ability to display, conceal, substitute and transition at once– may open up a variety of possibilities for critiquing and transgressing norms. I argued that lucha libre does not simply fit into nor fulfilled the hegemonic articulations of national identity, and that lucha libre’s play of masks especially complicated these concepts and power relations.



DULCE POLLY
2000

Fig. 89

In the second chapter, I established the complex history of the figures of the macho, La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe as key myths of gender models that were coupled with the production of Mexico as a nation. What becomes clear throughout this chapter is that these figures have been constantly in formation: performed, contested, reworked and/or reaffirmed through time in social practices as well as through a range of ideologies and imagery. Luchadores as well demonstrate wittily, playfully and through parody that machismo is a social and cultural construction. They perform a variety of masculinities rather than simply displaying themselves universally as machos. Moreover, as luchadoras also entered the initially masculine gendered space of lucha libre I explored aspects of femininity in relation to forms of masculinity by discussing the luchadoras’ appearances, performances and representations in the ring. Through my interpretations of the loca in the fichera film subgenre and linking it with los exóticos I examined the latter’s agency in and outside the ring to see if they destabilize well-established boundaries of masculinity and femininity, hetero- and homosexuality. There is a space for homosexuality in the luchas but that space is fraught with tensions and contradictions. Categories of being and appearance, repetition and imitation, masking and masquerade play an important role in the negotiation of genders. As such, all the luchadoris reveal each others’ constructions and performances in different ways. Throughout the chapter I explored how the luchas are a much more complex engagement of physical, psychological, symbolic, discursive and

social means than those that might take place within a binary gender logic, in which the principle of identity is used to set up a hierarchy. The luchadoris, I argue, make the instability of the constructed and performative acts of gender more obvious, letting the mask slip once in a while. I proposed that these acts are also a key component in the audience's and my own differently performed participations.

Consequently, the last chapter explored the affective conditions that are necessary for the luchas to unfold. Through exploring the space of the ring, the stands, the changing rooms, and lucha libre's "againsttogether" with sports—which allows gestures to play a significant role—I set out to show that the arena, as a whole, is a space where a crowd of strangers and a plurality of convictions come together and new grounds for communicative interaction may arise. In this process the "againsttogether" positioning of the luchadoris and the audience is an important one. At the centre of the luchas and the audience's unique complicity in the arena are gestures, such as the beso. Through dwelling on the beso, which is demanded, fought over, received and consummated in the arena and the ring, I reflected on thinking through gesture as utopian and as a transient trace of queer histories. As the luchas are able to demonstrate the powerful processes of the production of meaning, the construction of realities, and the constitution and public display of subjectivities, I questioned if in the arena, among the merely anonymous but intimate encounters, momentary utopias are already in full effect. In the luchas, even if only for their length, I argue, utopian as transformative potentialities—as ongoing, dynamic, dissident, unpredictable and transformative products of human actions and agencies—become apparent.

Throughout this thesis I have emphasized that lucha libre lies "againsttogether" several categories. For this reason, I developed queer reading strategies with the intention of complicating ways of seeing gender and sexuality as well as race, ethnicity, class, time and space. I do not assume that lucha libre could benefit from queer reading strategies, but I

argue that my reading does. I rather analyze how different and contradictory meanings of queer have been negotiated within lucha libre. Can queer learn from lucha libre? I claim so. As stated in the introduction, when I watched the luchas for the first time I read them as queer. I consider them queer not because the imagery of lucha libre and the luchadoris as such are queer, but because they are able to produce unanticipated relations that undermine normative expectations and challenge well-established hierarchies. I argue that the luchadoris, even though some of them understand and name themselves queer, are not in and of themselves queer, but in relation to other imageries, practices, constructions and bodies. Through offering different modes of performance, performativity and individuation, the luchas cause changing relations of approximation, projection and identification. I argue that there is a specificity in the arena which derives from a particular mixture of wider and more intimate social relations. The luchas emerge as a site of desire and contestation with underlying consciousness of conflicts, creating a space ripe with force and vulnerability. They occupy a liminal, suspended, cross-boundary zone where spectators become performers and where meaningful encounters and strange new social formations may take shape in a shared field of intersecting subjectivities.

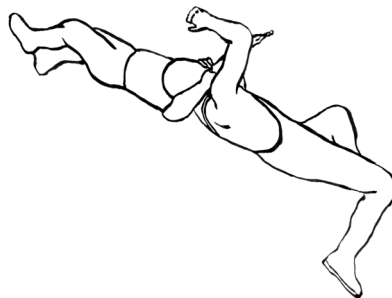


Fig. 90

Besides all the significations and ramifications that I am not able to grasp, there is one area of lucha libre that relates to the lived reality of the present in Mexico I did not have the space to explore, but which I consider an interesting and important area for future exploration. People in Mexico have to cope with at least 60.000 dead and 10.000 displaced, orphaned and forcibly

disappeared in the ongoing drug war since 2006. What role does performative violence play in a society that is unsettled by direct and indirect violence? Could *lucha libre* foster people to claim political agency rather than to hinder them as conditions of violence generally do? While verbal and gestural performances are not the same, I argue in the thesis that the play of gestures in *lucha libre* enrich an understanding of performative gestures in particular. I wonder though what might crystallize if I approached Butler's theory of the performative through the gestures in *lucha libre*? Could Butler's work, as a great resource for thinking about performative acts and performativity within culture in general, be used to look more closely at acquired physical routines through repetition and reiteration? This proposition would require a profound re-reading of Butler, likely in combination with a prolonged participation in *lucha libre*'s gestural performances which was beyond the scope of this PhD. However, in future work, it would certainly be worthwhile to more clearly locate agency in *lucha libre*, as a chance to work more consistently with gestures that generate meaning that is otherwise and beyond intention. For it is clear that these performative gestures are able to produce affects, feelings, and sensations that are not-yet named nor marked, that are not-yet charged with a fixed meaning nor fully understood. These affects, feelings, and sensations demand a change, containing new possibilities for thoughts, meanings, movements, mobilizations, actions and existence.



Fig. 91

Throughout my PhD project vulnerability has operated as a self-reflexive attempt to work with and near-by the luchas. Vulnerability as a state of not projecting yet another pre-established image but rather, as a way to grant a living, tender presence to the relationships I work with and between. Vulnerability causes us to reach out and to form relationships that may lead to communities and movements. Without a doubt, vulnerabilities are generative – particularly when simultaneous. Vulnerability points out that we are positioned differently in a net of emotional, economic and institutional relationships. In the course of this

project, I came to realize that during crises our vulnerability varies greatly in relation to the emotional, economic, institutional, social, ecological, material, spiritual and political resources we are embedded in. The counter strategy for vulnerability is thus not invulnerability but all these resources. In this sense, this research has taught me that vulnerability is not something to be overcome but rather something to be cultivated and embraced as part of a process of creating solidarity, of fighting for and maintaining the aforementioned resources.

During the luchas, amongst a variety of desires, expressions, and contradictions, women wish loudly for pregnancy, if only for the length of a hold; men dance for their beloved luchadores, if only for the length of a break between caídas; children imagine themselves up in the ring, if only for the length of a jump; people become queer, if only for the length of a kiss – to name just the nameable. However, all these readings of the luchas would be incomplete if we do not join them, if we do not actively participate in their constructions.

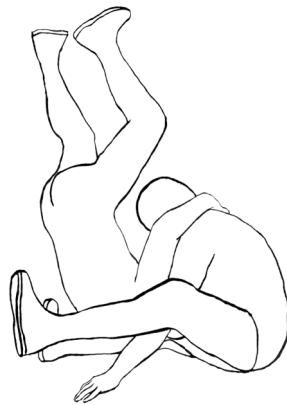


Fig. 92

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