

CHOLA IN A CHOKE HOLD: GENDER, GLOBALIZATION, AND  
AUTHENTICITY IN BOLIVIAN LUCHA LIBRE

By

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Submitted to the

Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences

of American University

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

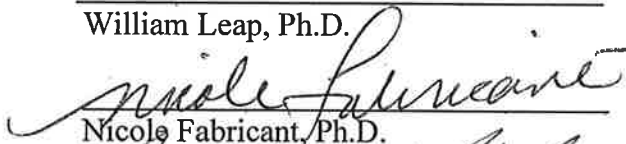
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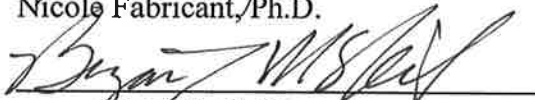
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## DEDICATION

For Ida, my very first wrestling partner

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores how globalization has impacted the practice of professional wrestling in La Paz, Bolivia. Specifically, I look at the “cholitas luchadoras”—female wrestlers who dress in traditional chola attire while performing, and their male colleagues who wear spandex costumes similar to those of exhibition wrestlers around the world. Given the exoticization of indigenous women and the fact that they are often positioned as symbols of the nation, it is not surprising that the cholitas luchadoras have become popular among both Bolivians and foreign tourists. In referencing the social capital of the indigenous woman, the luchadoras advance their own social standings, develop international mobility, increase potential for economic gain, and thus access certain forms of cosmopolitanism. However, male luchadores sometimes accuse the cholitas luchadoras of using clown-like gimmicks that contribute to an international reputation of Bolivian lucha libre as subpar. Within this context, notions of authenticity emerge as important sites of conflict and gendered tensions arise around the legitimacy of sport and economic gains. Thus, this dissertation explores the tensions between the local and global, tradition and modernity, and authenticity and illegitimacy as experienced and produced by luchadores in Bolivia.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These acknowledgements are difficult to write because I felt so many times during my fieldwork for this dissertation that my training began long before I even knew that the discipline of anthropology existed. My sports coaches, dance, acrobatics, and acting teachers throughout my youth helped create a sort of corporeal awareness that cannot be faked. In particular, I want to thank Connie Link and Greg Sutter, as well as Rob Winchester, Lawrence Glen Tucker, and the rest of the FUW who first introduced me wrestling, from backyards to Wrestlemania.

I also had inspiration from influential teachers throughout my life who not only encouraged me academically, but taught me to be assertive, confident, creative, and savvy. The influences of Rena Shifflet, E. Patrick Johnson, Harvey Young, Helen B. Schwartzman, and Dwight Conquergood will continue to inspire me and shape my work. But my parents, Mary and Thomas Haynes taught me the most important lessons of life: how to be strong, dedicated, and a critical thinker.

I have been fortunate to have found friends throughout my life who have encouraged and inspired me in countless ways. Gina Nicewonger and Jennifer Zook were the first, later joined by Ryan Scammell, David Riemenschneider, Dan Golden, Peter Wojtowicz, Evan Cobb, Joe Tuttle, Katie Jefferis, David Thayer, Ryan Costello, Mark Cartwright, Megan Keefe, Kelsey Otis, Jarod Johnson, Adam Slez, Beth Pesta, Kolter Campbell, and Jon Keselica. Throughout it all though, my best friend and biggest supporter has always been my sister, Ida.

In graduate school I was lucky enough to be accepted into a department that is collegial and encouraging. Bill Leap has guided my work in unexpected but important ways. I also must thank Bryan McNeil, Adrienne Pine, David Vine, Brett Williams, Rachel Watkins, and Sabiyha Prince at American University and from other institutions, both Heather Levi and Nicole Fabricant who gave me incredible feedback and support. But perhaps most importantly, my

colleagues with whom I shared classes, complaints, and late nights in the cubes, Naomi Steiner Jagers, Sarah Otto, Jennifer Delfino, Matthew Thomann, Elijah Edelman, Jesse Tune, Abby Conrad, Julie Koppel Maldonado, Dylan Kerrigan, Harjant Gill, Rodolfo Tello, and Ted Sammuel deserve great thanks.

Finally, I must thank the many people I met in Bolivia who let me into their lives and supported me in various ways. The luchadores of Super Catch are represented heavily in these pages, but that still does not do justice to everything they taught me. Big Boy, Dragón Galáctico and Dragón Galáctico II, Tony Montana, Sabu, Black Spyder, Estigma, Betty, Mercedes, Alex, Juanita, and Benita were some of the kindest, gentlest, most enjoyable, and badass research collaborators one could find. I am still baffled that they ever let such a lanky gringa into their ranks. I also must thank Ramiro Huyllar, Gustavo Palacios, Mauricio Salazar Jemio, Will Roman, Patty Morales, Alvaro Palacios, Jonathan Castillo Melgar, Tulul del Villar, Alejandra Hurtado, and Kicho Jimenez, Paula Seravia, Jorge Montesinos, Lorenzo Dolcetti, Lysanne Merkestein, Sam Anderson, Nolly Ghebre, Jaime McManus, Alan Las, Patricia Brigola, Juan Carrizo Ibarra, Jhonny Castillo Jaramillo, Derren Patterson, and Rylan Bokstrom, for helping me to fall in love with La Paz, despite its scary showers and literally breath-taking mountainous terrain.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: GENDER, GLOBALIZATION, AND AUTHENTICITY IN BOLIVIAN LUCHA LIBRE

On a typically gray July day in 2006, I sat in the kitchen of the family home in Lima, Perú where I was renting a room. Juana, the cook and housekeeper was boiling water in the corner, and Carmela the matriarch of the family was sifting through the Sunday newspaper, *El Comercio*. As she discarded sections, I picked them up, scanning through them, mostly looking at pictures. I was staying in Lima for two months to take Spanish lessons and volunteer at a local hospital, learning as much as I could about South America, because I hoped to apply to graduate school in the coming fall. In the paper, I found a retrospective on French philosopher Michel Foucault in the lifestyle section, and saved it to practice translating. I folded the page and put it in my notebook, then grabbed up the sports section Carmela had tossed aside. This was sure to be more readily understandable and have more pictures.

As I flipped through it I noticed a picture of two women squared off in a wrestling ring while wearing polleras, traditional layered skirts worn by Andean women. I quickly glanced through the short article, trying to make sense of what I saw. I learned that in La Paz, Bolivia, these “*cholitas luchadoras*” were becoming a new popular wrestling phenomenon. Having already snatched up the article on Foucault, I refolded the section and left it in on the table, sure that Carmela's husband Fernando or their nephew Carlos would notice a page missing in the sports section—especially during the 2006 World Cup. But later that night I searched online for “*cholitas luchadoras*” from the family computer and was fascinated.

*Lucha libre* [free wrestling] is a particularly Latin American form of professional-style, or exhibition wrestling. In Bolivia, *lucha libre* has gained tremendous popularity since 2001. This growing interest has been attributed in part to the addition of female *luchadoras* [wrestlers],

often referred to as *cholitas luchadoras* [wrestling cholitas]. While male luchadores in Bolivia wear skin-tight spandex clothing and masks that obscure their faces, the women dress in the traditional costume of the *chola*, an icon of Bolivian indigeneity.

Indigenous women in Bolivia, as in much of the world, are often exoticized and positioned as symbols of the nation. One encounters women wearing “traditional,” colorful polleras and bowler hats throughout the city of La Paz. While tourists often interpret them as part of an “authentic” experience of South American places and people, many locals view these women wearing polleras as an important part of their cultural heritage. It is not surprising, then, that the luchadoras who have based their characters on the cholas of La Paz have become popular among both Bolivians and foreign spectators. Because of the iconicity of the chola, I have been careful throughout this dissertation in how I refer to the women who wrestle. When speaking about them as a group I use the term “luchadoras” or “female wrestlers.” However, when I describe their characters or how they are positioned because of the characters they have chosen to portray, I call them “cholitas luchadoras.”

In referencing the cultural capital of the chola, the luchadoras advance their own social standings, develop international mobility, increase potential for economic gain, and thus access certain forms of cosmopolitanism. However, male luchadores sometimes accuse the cholitas luchadoras of using clown-like gimmicks that mar the international reputation of Bolivian lucha libre on the whole. Within this context, notions of authenticity emerge as important sites of conflict and gendered tensions arise around endeavors toward legitimacy in the sport, economic gains, and international attention.

This dissertation is based on my fieldwork in La Paz between 2009 and 2012, during which I lived in La Paz, attended wrestling matches, and conducted interviews with audiences,



luchadores, trainers, and others involved in lucha libre events. As part of participant observation, I trained with the lucha libre group, Super Catch, and eventually performed with them on television and in several live events. Based on my experiences, this dissertation explores the gendered articulation of authenticity, locality, nation, and globalization as both produced and experienced by luchadores in La Paz, Bolivia.

### Bodily Subjectivities and Representation in Bolivia

In performing as “cholitas,” the luchadoras play on the century-old notion of the chola as an icon of historical romanticism and the nation itself. With roots in the folkloric expression of indigenous peoples of the hacienda era, the chola character draws meaning from the historical subordination of non-white women, as well as the association of women wearing the pollera with protest and political action. Though the luchadoras’ bulky skirts may seem like difficult attire for wrestling, the pollera’s symbolism in some ways makes it an obvious choice for wrestling. Weismantel writes that the pollera, as worn in everyday life, announces the rejection of certain aspects of femininity, in which dress and body language express an implicit promise to be nice, agreeable, and passive. “The wearer of the pollera...promises to put up a good fight” (2001:130).

When conceptualizing the project that would eventually lead to my dissertation, I was first intrigued by the implications of the cholitas luchadoras for gender and race relations in La Paz, Bolivia. Their participation in such a masculine-identified realm as lucha libre was referred to as “feminist phenomenon” by English-language media (Carroll and Schipani 2008:2) and “transgressive” by locals. However, it seemed to me that given the historical and social contexts of the racialization of non-white women in La Paz, the impacts could be less progressive than these accounts suggest.

The positioning of women who may be seen as icons of traditional Bolivian femininity is clearly tied to the legacies of race and gender in Bolivia. As Peter Wade notes, in Latin American in general, race and sex have been intimately linked in the social order since colonialism began (2009:2). De la Cadena explains racial identities are performed through “complex interactions in accordance with the attributes that are recognized and confirmed, often through conflict, in particular power relations” (1995:331). As such, racial subjectivity is not only dependent on cultural variables, but may be fluid and multiple.

I use “race” specifically, rather than “ethnicity” to emphasize the ways human categorization leads to discrimination. As de la Cadena points out, “ethnic” distinctions in the Andes have been used by elites to justify prejudicial behavior, while claiming “racism” does not exist (2001:16). Peter Wade also argues that ethnicity often carries naturalizing connotations, in terms of how land and location shape people’s lives (2009:6). In contemporary Bolivia, as in much of Latin America, race is classed and localized; taking into consideration not only skin color and other racialized physical traits, but language, education, occupation, and wealth (de la Cadena 2001:16). Usually, those who speak indigenous languages, live in rural communities, are uneducated, or work in agriculture are raced as Indian, while urban residents, Spanish speakers (even if they are bilingual Quechua-speakers), and educated people are raced as mestizo (de la Cadena 1995:331). Clothing, language, food, education, and occupation are the major markers of race (de la Cadena 1995:340), but none of these designations are immutable, biological, or necessarily inherited from parents. Though language and occupation depend in part upon circumstances of upbringing, they are also traits that are acquired, and thus new variations may be learned. To become mestizo does not mean old traits must be left behind, but simply necessitates acquiring the cultural resources of mestizaje. Identification is constructed based on

these recognized characteristics, within interactions. Thus, it is possible for a person to identify as Indian in one relationship, and mestizo in another (de la Cadena 1995:331). Race, then, is a trait that is often ascribed, but is also a form of identifying that relies on performance, and may be used by those who claim it to mobilize stigmatized categories in their own interests (Muñoz 1999).

I also understand gender as a performed way of identifying that goes beyond assigned “sex” that is based on anatomical characteristics (Butler 1999, Fausto-Sterling 2000). Instead gender is a socially constructed way of categorizing people that varies among cultures and historical periods. As Connell writes particular genders are simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which people engage that place them in a gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experiences, personality, and culture (1995:71). As Butler puts it, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender;...[it] is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (1999:25). In other words, gender does not preexist behavior but is constituted in the performance of particular actions at particular times.

Social understandings of both gender and race rely on cultural “scripts.” As Turner suggests, a society’s unwritten rules, historical knowledge, and normative behaviors guide “actors” in forming their actions, and guide interlocutors and onlookers in their understandings (1982). As Butler demonstrates for gender (1999) and Wade (2002) for race, even though difference is performative, it may still easily be essentialized: “What the body *does* and what the subject is understood to *be* are often [be understood as] inseparable” (Canessa 2005:22).

Canessa writes, “Identities—racial, generational, ethnic, regional, national, gender, and sexual—are mutually informing, even as they may be contradictory, among people of the Andes”

(2005:3). Taking both race and sex as performed, it is necessary to interrogate how they are mutually constituted, and cannot be understood individually or out of context. In La Paz, gendered performances are always partially determined by and enacted through racial identities. To identify as an indigenous woman or as a chola, specifically, highlights specific forms of femininity, while also calling upon traits such as aggression or power that are associated with masculinity in other contexts. But these performances of gendered traits are inextricably linked with the racial notions of both indigeneity and mestizaje, and thus, cannot be fully understood outside of the racial history of Bolivia.

Categories of race, class, gender, education, language, location, and citizenship provide bases for inequalities that are co-constitutive and compounded (Delgado and Stefancic 2000, Wing 2003). These categories, along with their potential stigmas, act compositely rather than independently in affecting individuals' access to material and social capital (Valentine 2006:16; Berger 2004:2-4). In a country that is generally characterized as patriarchal and machista, women who identify or are categorized as indigenous face different difficulties than their male counterparts or mestiza and criolla women. The "multiplicity of interlocking components" (Munoz 1999:8) of identification often render indigenous women stigmatized and discriminated against in a number of ways.

Van Vleet (2005:119) cautions that though certain practices are performative, they cannot simply be "chosen" like a pollera or pants. These types of inequalities, because they are racialized and gendered, are visible upon the body. Though race in the Andes is composed of factors such as class, language, education, occupation, and place (2001:16) that are not "biological", these aspects are still written upon the body. As Lowe (1995) explains, people's bodies are constituted by their physical labor, consumption of commodities, socializing,

procreation, injury and healing. These processes vary widely by class in La Paz, and thus are raced in some ways. History, geography, culture, and tradition dictate to an extent what bodies, of a certain age, class, race, ethnicity, and gender, are capable of and permitted to do (Harvey 1998:406). Thus, the body is a contested site wherein both the individual possessor of the body, and external forces compete or collaborate to inscribe meaning (Henry 2006:385).

Throughout histories of colonialism, imperialism, and racism those in power have often naturalized certain bodies as inherently different than their own. Drawing from Althusser's notion of ideology as "the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real relations in which they live" (1971:165), such naturalization is grounded in what Said calls an "ideology of difference" (1985, see also Molande 2008). As he explains, difference is a binary and imperialist ideology, imposed on groups and buttressed by cultural discourse. Ideology places individuals and groups along a spectrum of inclusion and rights, resulting in material consequence (Althusser 1971:165).

Representations of violence—even those as playful as performative *lucha libre*—are not neutral. In the context of deeply entrenched race, class, and gender inequalities, they may implicate the legacies of colonial notions of non-white people as inherently different. Historians such as Benedict Anderson (1983) have noted that a key part of colonial projects connected race to lack of medical modernity, and thus lack of civilization. Colonial law in Bolivia specifically reflected the idea that indigenous peoples occupied a stagnated stage of development (Wade 1997:27), and thus they were expected to provide labor and tribute to the Spanish government in exchange for protection (Hylton and Thomson 2007:36). But as increasing amounts of labor and tribute were expected, indigenous resistance grew, and in 1781 Bolivia's first great indigenous insurrection was lead by Tupaj Katari (Hylton and Thomson 2007:7). Indigenous troops laid

siege on the capitol city of La Paz, and though they were unable to successfully take the city, this event began a long history of indigenous revolt in Bolivia, which many criollo Bolivians have taken as evidence of indigenous peoples' inherent proclivity toward violence.



Figure 1. Bolivia Shaded in a Map of South America. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 license.



Figure 2. Map of Major Cities in Bolivia. This map is in the public domain.

Stemming from this legacy of colonialism, and reinscribed through neoliberal practices (Hylton and Thomson 2007:95), Bolivian society has historically been deeply divided (U.S. Department of State 2004) between the indigenous majority and the more affluent and politically powerful criollo minority. Criollo Bolivians have had more access to economic and social resources, whereas indigenous peoples occupy lower rungs of the social hierarchy, and

disparaging talk about local indigenous people is common (Weismantel 2001:128). Of course, to say that racial designations in Bolivia create a clear binary erases both the mestizo middle class, as well as the great numbers of Bolivians who identify as both indigenous and mestizo, or take on these identifications variously in different contexts. Yet economic and social stratification have been polarized through the country's history.

This formation was intensified in 1985 when the World Bank-led "New Economic Policy" cut social services while privatizing industry and resources so that Bolivian citizens were forced to pay higher rates for their basic necessities (Gill 2000, Hylton and Thomson 2007). Structural adjustment forced thousands of government workers out of jobs, and dismantled services in areas where residents could not afford to purchase them from private companies (Gill 2000). Though Bolivia's first indigenous president, Evo Morales, has begun to reinstate social services and nationalize resources, Bolivia is still experiencing the effects of neoliberal economic measures.

Neoliberal processes have created a distinct set of formations under which indigenous and working class citizens have become more vulnerable, but also more oppositional. Social movements have successfully challenged government decrees and restored some autonomy over local resources. But these battles are often waged in the streets, as protestors block main thoroughfares or routes in and out of the city, bringing daily life in La Paz to a halt. Several of the protest movements made up primarily of indigenous peoples and working class citizens have resulted in governmental violence physically enacted on the bodies of protestors, or widespread civic violence. Indeed, one consequence of this kind of political action is that stereotypes of indigenous people as violent are reinforced (Goldstein 2004, Lazar 2008).



These political actions are in many ways performative and make clear that the border between performance as theatrical audience-directed spectacle and performance as everyday enactment are permeable and fluid. As Palmer and Jankowiak suggest, an enactment is always a presentation, if only to the actor him or herself (1996:240). Drawing from Schechner's approach, considering violence "as" performance allows for understanding the effects of violence on the actors—perpetrators and victims—as well as the audience of witnesses. Goffman and Hymes both note the importance of audience for the transfer of meaning through performance. Goffman defines performance as activities that have influence on observers (1959:22), while Hymes more specifically insists that performance must be instantiated by members of a community that have access to folk knowledge (1981:82). However, the audience need not be a formal entity. Any witness that draws meaning from the action may be considered an audience.

Understanding violence then, within a performance framework, makes clear the ways violence "as" performed is closely related to spectacles of performed violence. Theatrical violence, like "real" violence, is deeply embedded in political and historical context, and deeply affects perceptions of individuals and groups outside of the theatrical environment. Put simply, theatrical violence may contest or confirm ideologies of difference. While the luchadoras performances, and particularly their popularity among local working-class audiences, could easily be read by elite Bolivians as further proof that indigenous peoples are predisposed to violence, performance is also a key site for social action. Cultural performances may be "important dramatizations that enable participants to understand, criticize, and even change the worlds in which they live" (Guss 2006:9). Yet these two possibilities are not mutually exclusive. A single performance may be used to articulate strikingly different ideas at the same time.

My initial interest in dissertation research was to delineate to whom these spectacles bolstered racist stigmas and stereotypes about indigenous women and to whom they enacted a schematic for social change. I was intrigued by how these performances might simultaneously reinforce and revolutionize social institutions within the context of shifting valuations of indigeneity.

### Framework: Competing Cosmopolitanism and Arguments over Authenticity

What I found during five months in the field in 2011, however, was that the concerns of both luchadores and audience members were not focused on these race, gender, and class issues; at least not the way I expected to find. Instead, wrestlers' positionings in terms of race, gender, and class provided the backdrop for tensions about authenticity of performance, with both the women's portrayals of indigeneity, as well as the ways they specifically performed as wrestlers under scrutiny. The luchadoras have received noticeably more international attention than their male colleagues. This is primarily due to the ways they highlight their "authenticity" as chola women through their characterizations. However, many male luchadores were annoyed and resented this attention, suggesting that the women only used the gimmick to promote themselves because they were not skilled wrestlers, and further were not passionate about the sport. In contrast, the male luchadores claimed they were more legitimate wrestlers because of their training, commitment, and style.

But this tension extends beyond competing claims to authenticity. The women's popularity has given many of them access to forms of cosmopolitanism otherwise inaccessible to working class Bolivians. For some, their ability to highlight certain bodily characteristics has led to improved social status among locals, increased international mobility, and modest but additional income. Male luchadores who aspire to these same goals often feel resentment

towards the women's success. Their animosity, however, is framed in terms of desiring international legitimacy for Bolivian lucha libre, and point to the cholitas luchadoras as elements that add to their own delegitimation. They understand the performances of the cholitas luchadoras as diminishing the international legitimacy of Bolivian lucha libre, and thus their own access to cosmopolitan forms of social and cultural capital.

Male luchadores dismiss the cholitas luchadoras as exploiting a gimmick and wrestling like clowns—using cheap, humorous tricks rather than relying on skill and agility gained through hard work and training. They see the luchadoras' access to these forms of capital as rooted in the exploitation of bodily traits associated with indigeneity. In contrast, they see their own abilities as rooted in the body, but as those developed through training. Both groups then work at transforming their “bodily capital” (Wacquant 1995:66) into other forms of capital—recognition, mobility and income.

I draw my discussions of different forms of capital in this dissertation from Pierre Bourdieu, who defined all forms of capital as the social relations that exist within a system of exchange. Like Marx (2010:50), Bourdieu conceptualizes capital as the product of accumulated labor. Within the three different forms of capital Bourdieu discusses—economic, social, and cultural—both material goods and symbolic forms of exchange are included (1986).

Economic capital is the form most reflective of common usage of the term, but not all capital represents the exchange of material goods. Bourdieu defines social capital as the sum of “actual or potential resources” that are part of social relationships and institutionalized networks of which an individual is a part (Bourdieu 1986:248). Within these networks, which may include familial, career, educational, political, geographical, and other forms of relationships, social obligations are convertible, under certain conditions, into economic capital (1986:243).

Similarly, cultural capital includes dispositions of mind and body (such as knowledge or skills gained through education), cultural goods (such as books or musical instruments which can be played), and qualifications (Bourdieu 1986:243). Of course, Bourdieu notes that cultural capital, though possessed by an individual, is very much influenced by the family or group of which that individual is a part. The economic capital of the family often influences how early accumulation of cultural capital can begin and how long it will last. Indeed, Bourdieu emphasizes the impact of the educational system in reproducing the social structure because it sanctions the transmission of cultural capital within families from one generation to the next (1986:246).

The conceptualization of these forms of capital is at times criticized for being circular, simultaneously cause and effect. However, as Somers (1994) argues, this is partially because the approach is relational, and requires a view of the social phenomena as part of changing relationships. Bourdieu primarily used these symbolic forms of capital to illustrate how elite groups reproduce privilege, thus conceptualizing them as consciously created or optimized. This has been critiqued by scholars such as Coleman who understand social capital as an unintentional process which functions because it arises from activities intended for other purposes (1994: 312). Indeed, Arrow points out the fact that social capital implies a “deliberate sacrifice in the present for future benefit” as a particular detriment to the theory, as he also sees the essence of social networks as being formed for reasons other than their economic value to the participants (2000:4). However, I believe that my use of the concepts, in the vein of Bourdieu’s intentions, make sense within a specific context. Because social and cultural capital can be understood as operating within different levels of social units—individual, household, community, nation, or even global system—the validity of the theory depends on its contextualization (Sandefur and

Lauman 1998). From the Bourdieuan perspective, social capital becomes a resource in social struggles that are carried out in different social settings. For both female and male Bolivian luchadores, social and cultural capital must be understood as resources employed in order to maximize their advantages. These forms of capital allow luchadores to maximize their strategies within systems and institutions that consistently place them at a disadvantage. The fact that men and women use different strategies in the same context is a product of the fact that they draw from different forms of capital to which they have access.

Economic and cultural capital have their own modes of existence (money or wealth; examinations and diplomas), but symbolic capital exists only in the in the perception of others. It inevitably assumes an ideological function by naturalizing legitimized forms of distinction and classification, and thus conceals the arbitrary way in which these forms of capital are distributed among individuals in society (see Bourdieu 1984, 1986, Joppke 1987:60).

Social and cultural capital at times bleed into one another. Particularly in my discussions of recognition in lucha libre, both the institutional recognition associated with qualification as a form of cultural capital, and the recognition connected to group membership apply. However, I have made a distinction between the two, using the term cultural capital to refer to individuals' starting point (usually before wrestling) in terms of social class, educational level, and access to resources, while I use social capital to refer to the networks, mobility, and cosmopolitanism gained as a result of wrestling, travel, international affiliations, and media attention.

But as both Marx (2010) and Bourdieu would point out, the social capital gained in such ways does not spontaneously appear, but instead is the result of labor being transformed into capital. And in the case of these luchadores, that labor is primarily embodied. Indeed, Bourdieu emphasizes that “most of the properties of cultural capital can be deduced from the fact that, in

its fundamental state, it is linked to the body and presupposes embodiment” (Bourdieu 1986:246). Wacquant, in his discussion of boxers in Chicago, uses the term “bodily capital” to describe the ways they monitored their bodies in preparation for a fight, including training and keeping their weight. I refer to bodily capital throughout this dissertation, in discussions of wrestlers’ training, conditioning, and how they present their characters in the ring. Additionally, I expand this idea to include the ways the cholitas luchadoras play up their indigeneity. But as this research makes clear, not only do social and cultural capital bleed into one another, bodily capital may also be considered one, both, or neither under different circumstances. The luchadoras’ management of bodily capital as they train to execute wrestling moves allows access to the recognition, mobility, and media exposure that constitute increased social capital. But just as Babb asserts of indigenous women selling goods to tourists throughout Latin America, the luchadoras’ ability to play up their presentations of indigeneity gives them opportunities to “transform social marginality into cultural capital” (Babb 2011:173).

The bodily capital that the luchadoras possess as indigenous women allows them to claim authenticity. Though various scholars define authenticity differently, here I refer to it as an ascribed valuing of cultural continuity (Hervik 1999), relying on identifiers of being pristine, genuine, and traditional (Handler 1986:2). Seemingly, then, the converse of authenticity is cosmopolitanism—knowledge and appreciation of other languages and cultures (Szerszynski and Urry 2002), wealth and privilege (Calhoun 2002), mobility, willingness, and means to travel (Szerszynski and Urry 2002), or even the imagining of integrating global goods and practices into daily life (Schein 1994, Appadurai 1996:4). However, as discussions of the cholitas luchadoras make clear, the two at times work to instantiate each other. By drawing upon the

notion of the authentic, the luchadoras have gained access to forms of cosmopolitanism via their media attention, mobility, and resulting international popularity.

### A Brief History of the Local and Global in Lucha Libre

The cosmopolitan imaginaries that the cholitas luchadoras have achieved are partially due to the global reach of wrestling. Lucha libre, as it is practiced in Bolivia now, is part of a long international history of exhibition wrestling. Exhibition wrestling, a term describing wrestling forms that incorporate elements of performance rather exemplifying pure athletic competition, is a useful phrase given that much “professional wrestling” around the world is undertaken by amateurs and does not provide enough income to sustain a livelihood. Though debates over whether exhibition wrestling is “real” or “fake” span generations and continents, the extent to which the productions engage an audience with flashy costumes, charismatic characters, and compelling storylines is undeniable. Exhibition wrestling events sometimes have predetermined winners and choreographed moves. There are referees but they often function as symbols of sport rather than actually enforcing rules, and sometimes even help wrestlers break the established rules. Grindstaff and West point out that theatrical aspects of performance are often placed in contrast to sport, but in a number of athletic contests such as figure skating, cheerleading, and gymnastics, planned performance for an audience is integral to the activity (2006:508-509). Thus, to discount wrestling as “fake” because of its planned performative aspects disregards the athleticism necessary to execute flying summersaults and two-person flips. But at the same time, audience appeal is central to its nature, and its aspects of performance and must not be ignored either.

Exhibition wrestling around the world shares certain conventions. The basic unit of performance is the match. In contrast to amateur wrestling matches, the exhibition match

normally takes place inside a ring similar to a boxing ring. A fall is defined the same way that it is in freestyle wrestling: the winner either pins the loser's shoulders to the ground for three seconds (as counted by the referee) or puts the loser in an immobilizing (and pain inducing) hold (Levi 2008:7). In Mexico, the match usually ends when one side wins two out of three falls. In Bolivia, as in the United States, usually a match ends with a single fall.

Exhibition wrestling is distinguished from freestyle wrestling by three things. First the wrestlers fight as morally coded characters. On one side is the "clean wrestler, in that he follows what are supposed to be, and what are perceived by the audience, as the rules." On the other side is "the wrestler who breaks these supposed rules in order to gain what the audience should consider an unfair advantage" (Birrell and Turowetz 1984:263). In *lucha libre* these are called the *técnico* and the *rudo*, respectively. Second, techniques that are forbidden in amateur wrestling are considered both legal and conventional in the exhibition version. These include some holds, but also hitting (as long as its not with a closed fist), running away, and bouncing or jumping off the ropes that surround the ring. Though using foreign objects such as chairs or sticks is technically against the rules, it is common and rarely deemed inappropriate by the referee or the audience. In fact, many audiences cheer especially loudly at such ploys. Finally, as Levi explains, in exhibition wrestling, the outcome of the match is often decided in advance (2008:8).

Though competitive wrestling has existed at least since the Hellenistic empire, the modern ancestry of exhibition wrestling began in Vermont in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Charles Wilson (1959) traces this history to the United States Civil War, during which organized bouts became popular among Union troops. After the war, saloons in New York City began promoting matches to draw customers. By the end of the 19th century PT Barnum was using wrestling "spectaculars" in his circus. It was here that wrestling in the United States first took on the name



“Catch-as-catch-can” wrestling, derived from an English style of wrestling developed and named by J.G. Chambers in 1871. At first, wrestlers would fight untrained “marks” from the audience, but by the 1890s they began to fight trained wrestlers planted in the audience. It was then that it changed from a “contest” to a “representation of a contest.” These spectacles were very popular and were replicated at county fairs, which eventually resulted in intercity circuits by 1908 (Wilson 1959). By the 1920s, promoters began to add gimmicks to make characters more memorable.

In 1933, after character development, rules, and other conventions had been established, a promoter named Salvador Lutteroth who saw such matches in the US began organizing exhibition wrestling matches in Mexico. He and his partner Francisco Ahumado set up their first wrestling event in the Arena Nacional in Mexico City on September 21, 1933. The next year they began the Empresa Mexicana de Lucha Libre (Levi 2008:22). In the following few years, innovations in costuming, character, and technique further shifted the genre away from practices that were standard in the US, making lucha libre a form of exhibition wrestling unique to Mexico.

Levi explains that during the 1950s lucha libre spectators in Mexico were overwhelmingly of the popular classes. But lucha libre still retained a sense of urbanism and modernity (2008:23). It began to be televised during this decade which attracted a middle class audience. It was also during this time that it became a popular subject for hundreds of Mexican films (2008:23).

As part of this increased visibility of Mexican wrestling, luchadores began traveling throughout Latin America putting on events. The sports pages of El Diario newspaper from the 1950s advertised the building of a new park complete with a ring to be used for both box and

“catch” [catchascan<sup>1</sup>] (El Diario 18 January 1952). In March of 1952 El Diario advertised that in June a catchascan season would open in La Plaza de Torros [Bull Plaza] in the San Pedro neighborhood of La Paz (12 March 1952). The report mentions specific wrestlers such as Vincent Garcia from Spain, Renato “El Hermoso” [The Handsome], Barba Roja [Red Beard], Bobo Salvaje (all of unmentioned country origins), and Takanaka from Japan, saying they had recently held events in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Santiago, Chile, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Lima, Peru. La Paz would be the next stop on their tour. Whether or not this tour was organized by Mexican wrestlers is unclear, but the wrestling traditions in Buenos Aires, Santiago, Rio, and Lima all had roots in the lucha libre of Mexico City. Thus, the influence of Mexican lucha libre no doubt permeated the forms that wrestling took throughout South America in the 1950s.

Many Bolivians suggest that La Paz was a ready market for lucha libre when it arrived. It already had a strong Greco-Roman and Olympic wrestling tradition. And there were several popular boxing clubs in the capital city dating back to the 1930s and 1940s. Some Paceños also suggest that more “traditional” customs made Bolivia a likely place for lucha libre to succeed. Specifically several mentioned the tradition known as “Tinku” [meaning “encounter” in Quechua and “physical combat” in Aymara] from the northern part of Potosí. In this ritual combat, usually men (but occasionally women) from feuding towns fight in a circle, sometimes to the death. Blood spilled in these combats is considered a sacrifice to *Pachamama*, the Andean Earth Mother deity. Tinkus are not only bloody fights, but have been dramatized in dances popular in holiday parades throughout Bolivia. The Tinku dance, as seen in Carnaval, Gran Poder, and University Entrada parades in La Paz, involves stylized combat-like movements to a heavy drum beat. The connection between Tinku and wrestling is still unclear with several luchadores telling

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<sup>1</sup> “Catchascan” is a word synonymous with “lucha libre.” The word is often abbreviated as simply “catch,” as in the group name Super Catch.

me that they didn't know of any specific connection between the two. As my friend Ramiro quipped, "I think the only way cholitas wrestling could help crops be abundant is when the cholita wrestlers send money to their villages to buy extra seed." However, the frequency with which spectators mentioned the Tinku suggests that a connection between the two remains ingrained in the popular imagination.

Instead, *lucha libre* in Bolivia grew almost entirely out of the Mexican tradition. In April 1952, *El Diario* advertised a festival combining *box* [boxing] and *catchascan* with matches between Pulpo and Tigre [Octopus and Tiger], Rudo and Pampero [Bad One and Pampero], and Diablo Rojo and Oso [Red Devil and Bear]. These names suggest that even in these early stages, Bolivian wrestlers had already adopted the practice of creating characters rather than wrestling as themselves.

Mr. Atlas, one of the most veteran wrestlers in La Paz, shared with me some old newspaper clippings that seem to confirm 1965 as an important year. One clipping [figure 1] advertises the arrival of Blue Demon, El Santo, and Espanto III, all from Mexico. Mr. Atlas had written on a card he kept with the clipping "Lucha Libre Internacional de 1965 cuando llegan por primera vez a Bolivia El Santo y Blue Demon juntamente con Espanto III" [International Lucha Libre from 1965 when El Santo and Blue Demon along with Espanto III come to Bolivia for the first time]. These Mexican luchadores traveled to Bolivia with the intention of spreading the popularity of *lucha libre*. They hoped to both introduce wrestling to new audiences, as well as train locals in the practice. Many of the most veteran Bolivian wrestlers who are still active in *lucha libre* identify these Mexican luchadores as their childhood inspiration. Rocky Aliaga, a Bolivian who currently wrestles in Spain told reporter Marizela Vazquez, "From my childhood I

was fan of wrestling and what excited me most was to attend events...of Mexican characters such as Huracán Ramírez, Rayo de Jalisco, and Lizmark.”



Figure 3. An Unattributed Newspaper Clipping from Mr. Atlas.

Mr. Atlas also recalled, “Empecé a pelear cuando tenía 13 años, en 1965, en el momento en que llegaron a La Paz los grandes de la lucha libre mexicana. Particularmente recuerdo a Huracán Ramírez, que fue quien me apadrinó” [I started fighting when I was 13 in 1965, when the greats of Mexican wrestling arrived in La Paz. Particularly I remember Huracán Ramírez, the man who fathered me]. Huracán Ramírez, whose real name was Daniel Garcia, spent a good deal of time in Bolivia, and eventually married a Bolivian woman, Euly Fernandez. Now his widow, she explains in a video recorded by Super Catch luchadores that Garcia arrived in Bolivia with the best intentions to train a new generation of wrestlers in the Mexican style.

Mr. Atlas showed me another clipping from March of 1965 [figure 2] advertising matches between Bolivian wrestlers. The ad includes Mr. Atlas, himself confronting Principe, Medico Loco against SI Montes, as well as a match with Diablo Rojo. What is particularly interesting about this advertisement however, is that under the name of each luchador is either the word “tecnico” or “rudo.” This reveals the importance of character development at this early stage of the Bolivian wrestling tradition

**GRAN CAMPEONATO RELAMPAGO**

**PROGRAMA**

<b>SI. MONTES</b> (TECNICO)	VERSUS	<b>MEDICO LOCO</b> (RUDO)
<b>ARANA</b> (RUDO)	VERSUS	<b>ALEX EL ROMANO</b> (TECNICO)
<b>GALENO</b> (TECNICO)	VERSUS	<b>ROBIN</b> (RUDO)
<b>EL MARCIANO</b> (RUDO)	VERSUS	<b>ESCORPION</b> (TECNICO)
<b>PANTERA</b> (TECNICO)	VERSUS	<b>DRAGON</b> (RUDO)
<b>Mr. ATLAS</b> (TECNICO)	VERSUS	<b>PRINCIPE</b> (RUDO)
<b>CESAR EL GRANDE</b> (TECNICO)	VERSUS	<b>DIABLO ROJO</b> (RUDO)
<b>GLADIADOR</b> (TECNICO)	VERSUS	<b>BAMBY</b> (RUDO)
<b>VENGADOR</b> (TECNICO)	VERSUS	<b>YANQUE</b> (TECNICO)
<b>CORSARIO</b> (RUDO)	VERSUS	<b>AGUILA</b> (RUDO)

**Martes 23 de Marzo a Horas 15 y 30 COLISEO CERRADO**

<b>AUTORIDADES:</b> ARBITRO GENERAL: Sr. Abel Mendez. JUECES: Miembros de la Asociación Deportiva de Lucha Libre. INSPECTOR DE RING: Sr. Luis Calani. CREDITADO: Sr. Severino Trujillo, Luis Jordán, Mario Amor y Gerardo Caldeón. MEDICOS: Drs. Asa Rojo, Walter Arizaga. COMISION TECNICA: Sr. Carlos Rada, Mario Roca.	<b>PRECIOS:</b> Ring Side \$b. 10.— Preferencia " 7.— General " 5.— 1/2 General " 3.—
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**TEMPORADA INTERNACIONAL DE LUCHA LIBRE**  
 El Santo, Huracán Ramírez, Blue Demon, Rayo de Jalisco, Cavernario Galindo, Frankenstein y otros campeones mundiales de Lucha Libre.  
**4 DE ABRIL COLISEO CERRADO**

Figure 4. An Unattributed Newspaper Clipping from Mr. Atlas.

Much of the information I learned about the history of lucha libre since the 1970s came from Roberto, a wrestler in the Super Catch group. Though he was only 24, he explained to me that “Yo era fanatico! Me metía dentro de los vestidores, escuchaba todo de los luchadores. Es

por eso que sé casi toda la historia de la lucha libre en Bolivia.” [I was a fanatic [when I was a kid]. I snuck into the dressing rooms, I listened to all the wrestlers. That’s why I know almost all the history of lucha libre in Bolivia]. He explained to me that during the 1960s lucha libre events took place in the Perez Velasco, a commercial area just outside of central La Paz that is a popular market for working class and middle class people. Luchadores usually wrestled in a makeshift ring and set up seating in a fútbol field. As Roberto told me, the costumes of the luchadores were not as “llamativos” [flashy] then, and almost everything was improvised. But by the mid-seventies, the Olimpic Ring was built in the neighborhood of San Pedro, and with its opening began what Roberto suggests many refer to as the “época dorada de la lucha libre boliviana” [golden age of Bolivian wrestling].

By the 1980s however, imitation of Mexican luchadores was becoming more prevalent, with both names and costumes being “borrowed.” But this was also the period when some of the legendary figures of Bolivian lucha libre began. Roberto named two in particular: Sombra Vengadora and Medico Loco. Sombra Vengadora continues to wrestle to this day but Medico Loco passed away in 2010.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, interest in lucha libre waned in La Paz. But in the late 1990s, a major shift occurred when Bolivian lucha libre first appeared on television. In 1998, a group of luchadores calling themselves Furia de Titanes [Fury of Titans] who were regularly putting on shows at the Olimpic Ring noticed TV personality Adolfo Paco in the audience. They approached him about beginning a lucha libre program on Asociación Televisión Boliviana (ATB) channel 9, and he agreed. The program was filmed in the Coloseo de Villa Victoria, and was an immediate success, which Roberto attributed to the fact that the wrestlers were highly skilled. In addition to large television audiences, the group began attracting long lines of people

hoping to see the shows taped live. Luchadores gained notoriety and were featured in local newspapers and magazines. With the addition of several corporate sponsors, luchadores earned about \$200 per event.

But this success was fleeting, because luchadores that Roberto characterized as less-skilled also offered their performances to Paco, he accepted, causing bitter arguments between the groups. By 1999, Furia de Titanes had split in two. Those on one side of the argument kept the name Furia de Titanes and remained on ATB, while others adopted the name Lucha de Campeones and began wrestling on the Uno network, channel 11. The rupture ultimately resulted in smaller audiences, which caused the sponsors to terminate their support and thus luchadores in both groups took home significantly less pay. Lucha de Campeones, for example, offered free entrance to their live shows to encourage larger audiences, but as a result luchadores made only 250 to 350 Bolivianos (\$35-50 US) per event. The final problem, as Roberto explained, was that in the year 2000, several luchadores complained to Paco that they had never received the health insurance they had been promised. Paco ignored their requests and in retaliation, the luchadores refused to put on their event the next Sunday. “Y fue lo último. Ni siquiera pudieron despedirse de su público como se debe” [And that was the end. They couldn’t even say goodbye to their audience as they should have. “Desde entonces la lucha libre estuvo casi muerta en Bolivia” [Since then lucha libre has been almost dead in Bolivia].

### Lucha Libre Today: Enanos y Cholitas

However, the end of lucha libre on Bolivian television was quickly followed by the beginning of what might be considered the current era of Bolivian lucha libre, which Roberto characterized as the “aparicion de los luchadores enanos y por supuesto la lucha de cholitas” [the appearance of midget wrestlers, and of course the cholitas’ wrestling]. The most visible group

promoting both “midget wrestlers” and the cholitas luchadoras has been Titanes del Ring [Titans of the Ring], which Roberto says existed under a different name prior to when they added these two spectacles to their events. When I began my fieldwork Titanes del Ring was the only group with a set schedule and permanent venue. The group consistently attracted hundreds of audience members each Sunday at their show in the Multifuncional de la Ceja de El Alto (the multifunctional arena located in the Ceja market area of El Alto). They also were the first to cater to tourists, with the help of local tourism company Secretos Andenos [Andean Secrets].

In 2009, when I first met LIDER wrestlers, the group was managed by Kid Simonini and Jaider Lee, the sons of Medico Loco. They performed in a much smaller arena in the neighborhood of Villa Victoria, a working class area sometimes referred to as Villa Balazos (Bullet Town) given its high crime rates. They did not have a permanent weekly schedule, and the wrestlers often traveled to put on shows in nearby small altiplano towns. They did not market themselves to tourists specifically, and when I attended their shows I was the only visibly non-Bolivian in the audience. However, by the time I left La Paz at the end of 2012, the group was starting to work more like Titanes del Ring with shows every Sunday in the Coloseo 12 de Octubre in El Alto, and several different tour companies helping them to attract foreign tourists to their shows. However, while Titanes del Ring usually garnered between 150-200 foreign tourists per week, LIDER only had about 20.

Lucha Fuerza Extrema (LFX) was another group, started in 2005 by the sons of Sombra Vengadora: Sombra Jr., and Vampiro Uno. During the time of my fieldwork, LFX was a growing group, focused on “extreme” wrestling, in which they used items like chairs, tables, ladders, light bulbs, thumb tacks, and anything else that was breakable or hard enough to hit with. Like the schedule of LIDER when I first began fieldwork, LFX performed sporadically and



at different locations around La Paz and El Alto. Roberto attributed their lack of events to internal arguments.

Super Catch is the fourth lucha libre group in La Paz and the one with which I worked most closely. The group was formed in 2010, and I joined them in January of 2012. Between January and November of that year I trained with them a few times a week, appeared on local and national television talk shows about 15 times to promote the group, and wrestled in 5 live events. Much of my dissertation is based on what I learned from that experience.

Each of these groups—LIDER, LFX, Super Catch, and Titanes del Ring—perform in the coloseos of La Paz and El Alto, though some more regularly than others. These venues, sometimes called arenas, do not appear like gymnasiums of the United States. They are made almost entirely from concrete and are covered by a roof, but there is space between the tops of the walls and roof structure. The buildings are drafty and cold, especially after dark. Audience members who sit along the wall on concrete bleachers or on plastic chairs around the ring, usually wear heavy coats and sometimes bring a blanket to cover their legs.

For most of my time in La Paz Super Catch wrestlers moved around different venues, putting on shows once or twice per month—usually on a Friday night. Some venues, like the Coloseo de Villa Victoria (the same location where most LIDER shows took place from 2009-2011) were quite large and well known, but the group also put on shows in neighborhood parks or recreation centers. At the time I was finishing fieldwork, Super Catch was trying to negotiate for their events to be televised on the local television station, Palenque TV, in weekly shows under the name Tigres del Ring.

Though I did not start wrestling until 2012, I met Edgar, the default leader of Super Catch in July of 2011. Edgar, a 24 year old auto mechanic, was introduced to me by a luchadora that I

had interviewed several times. I always asked her what the male luchadores thought of the fact that women were wrestling too, and after lightheartedly responding, “Pregunta a ellos!” [Ask them!] several times, she put me in contact with Edgar. I interviewed him several times, the last of which was just two days before I left La Paz in 2011. He suggested when I returned in 2012 I should start training with the group.

Edgar was a short but athletically built Paceño with short spiky black hair. He usually wore one of several Puma brand track suits and a necklace with a shark tooth. He wrestled primarily as Big Boy, wearing a camouflage spandex outfit and mask, but also sometimes as Lince, in a costume reminiscent of a panther. Edgar, as my trainer—or my “profe” in lucha libre lexicon, was the Super Catch luchador with whom I spent the most time. He was energetic, both in training and outside of wrestling, and seemed to be a natural leader. He was motivational, good at organizing people, and always wanted to make sure everyone was taken care of. He could be harsh though. He often expressed frustration openly and yelling at wrestling partners was not beyond him. However, he never let his temper get the best of him, and always took care to ask his wrestling partners if they were ok after every difficult move.

Edgar lived with his mother, Claudia in the neighborhood of Villa Copacabana. Claudia always helped at events, selling tickets or refreshments. She was kind and something of a stage mother and treated all the luchadores as if they were her children. She took a particular liking to me and always walked me to public transportation and made sure I was comfortable and safe. Edgar’s father lived closer to the center of the city. He had been a famous Bolivian wrestler in the 1970s, performing under the name Sabu. He acted as an advisor and sometimes trainer for the group. When Super Catch wrestlers would appear on local television programs to publicize events, he always went along, portraying the character of Super Cuate [Super Friend], and

usually did the majority of speaking on camera. He also acted as the announcer at live Super Catch shows.

Roberto, who was so knowledgeable about the history of lucha libre, was another principle wrestler in Super Catch. After years of being a fanatic he started wrestling when he was 16. By the time we met, he was 24 and working on a graduate studies in international relations. His younger brother Julien was only 19, the youngest wrestler of the group and was beginning university studies. Roberto switched between two wrestling personas, both of which were based on martial arts style: JinBoy and Dragón Galáctico. When Julien began wrestling he started performing as Dragón Galáctico II. The two Dragones Galácticos often wrestled against each other or as tag team partners, but also had their own repertoires. Similarly, Miguel (22), was a good friend of theirs and often trained and performed with the brothers as Kazama, wearing track pants with flames on the sides. These three young luchadores all lived in El Alto. They were thin and limber, and were the most acrobatically adept, often attempting flying leaps, flips, and twists. To me they were usually the most visually stunning of the Super Catch wrestlers, and I always trusted them to catch me on leaps from the ropes, even when they didn't trust themselves.

First among the slightly older wrestlers was Jorge (in his late twenties), who was still working on the character he would eventually portray: Black Spyder. He didn't feel his skills were yet at the level he would like to present Black Spyder in the ring, but would wear the costume for TV appearances. In the meantime, he wrestled only as El Condenado, a generic zombie-like character. Jorge was intense about "getting into character" for El Condenado, often putting on his costume very early and not speaking to other wrestlers until after his match. Outside of performance though, he always seemed to me like a big kid. He was taller and broader than most Bolivians, and almost looked as if he had the build of a college football

player. He sometimes seemed uncomfortable towering above others, but was also one of the most personable of the group. He always spiked his hair with water and wore a baggy white t shirt, jeans, and imitation Ray Ban sunglasses outside of practice. He had lived in the United States for a few years as a child and loved talking to me about professional American football. He lived with his parents in the neighborhood of San Pedro, a few blocks from my own apartment, and like Claudia always made sure I got home safely.

Jorge and Alvaro were the two most physically imposing of the wrestlers in the group. Next to Jorge, Alvaro appeared small, but was bigger and taller than most Paceños. Alvaro, who is in his mid-thirties, looked like a 1980s hair metal band member to me. His long dark ponytail continued about 2 feet down his back, and was visible emerging from his Estigma mask. Alvaro attended training sessions less consistently than some of the others, so I knew less about his personal life, but he was always a bright addition, cracking jokes and buying a 2 liter bottle of Coca-Cola for everyone to share after practice.

Luis, who worked as a doctor in a major La Paz hospital performed as Big Man (though not any relation to Big Boy). He also attended training sessions only sporadically, but was useful to have around, especially when small injuries occurred. He was especially helpful to me, because I often didn't know the Spanish vocabulary for small injuries and thanks to him I learned the words "contracción" [cramp], "torcedura" [sprain], and "espasmo" [spasm]. Finally Victor, who performed as Tony Montana in fatigues and a white cape and mask, was in his early 40s, and had been wrestling for almost 25 years. He lived near la Ceja in El Alto, was a airplane mechanic at the national air base, and had a Saturday morning radio program on the side. He was always enthusiastic about my participation, and often invited me to festivals and family events.

Though Super Catch was primarily composed of the men listed above, there were also three other people who trained and wrestled with Super Catch less consistently. Betty, who went by the moniker The Super Cholita, was my first opponent in an event. She was a nurse at a local hospital, and attended training sessions only a few weeks before the publicized events, mostly to coordinate with me. Edgar had known her for some time and convinced her to wrestle me in the match. When we first met, I towered above her and she was skeptical the match would work. “Es demasiada alta!” [She’s too tall!] she exclaimed upon seeing me. But eventually she was convinced and we developed a good wrestling rapport. We also became friends and our giggling with each other during training annoyed Edgar and some of the more serious wrestlers at times.

Similarly, husband and wife Alex and Mercedes occasionally trained or performed with Super Catch. Alex’s usual character was Desertor, and Mercedes wrestled as La Extrimista. They usually wrestled against one another, rather than as partners, and back stage Mercedes, Betty and I would spend time together, both coaching each other and gossiping. Alex worked as a producer for a local television network, and Mercedes raised their daughter and two sons. Their daughter once came along with them to a television publicity interview dressed in a princess dress and lucha libre mask. Their younger son also sometimes performed in events as Chucky from the movie *Child’s Play*, running around the ring weilding a fake knife made of plastic.

Outside of Super Catch, I was also friends with several LIDER luchadores and luchadoras. In fact, the very first interview I conducted for the project was with LIDER luchadora, Juanita la Cariñosa, and her trainer (who I later found out was also her husband) Kid Simonini. Simonini, son of the late Médico Loco, was in his mid-40s. He wrestled only occasionally, but spent more time as a lucha libre trainer. He and Juanita lived in El Alto with their two children. Juanita, who was 29, worried me in 2011 when I had trouble getting in touch

with her. Later, she contacted me through Roberto and I learned that she had taken two years off of wrestling between 2010 and 2011 when her second child was born. Juanita, along with fellow LIDER luchadoras Benita and Antonia have started trying to market LIDER matches to tourists, working with several tour agencies in central La Paz. Much like with Titanes del Ring, they arrange a bus to transport spectators to el Coloseo 12 de Octubre in El Alto. The tour group members are given a snack of popcorn and soda and a small trinket souvenir. Though they usually had less than 20 tourists each event, they were trying very hard to expand this portion of the business.

Of course there were many other people with whom I worked and developed relationships during my fieldwork, but the luchadores mentioned above were the most important in shaping how I developed as a wrestler and my ideas about lucha libre in Bolivia. It is their involvement and ideas that have significantly influenced the form of this dissertation.

### Summary of Chapters

My fieldwork took on a participatory nature, and chapter two details my methods. Traditional anthropological methods such as interviewing are discussed, along with my experiences wrestling with Super Catch. Specifically I discuss how my interests changed as a result of differing methods, and my move from spectatorship to involvement. Also important is the treatment of secrecy and the ways this affected my participation and overall experience during fieldwork. In this chapter I also begin to talk about issues of authenticity that become more central in later chapters.

Chapter three concentrates on what I learned during ethnographic fieldwork while wrestling with the luchadores of Super Catch. It begins with a description of lucha libre events and focuses on the ways some luchadores contrasted agility to clowning. Tension between these

styles was closely related to their appeal to different groups internationally, in the context of competing desires for cosmopolitanism. Given the socio-economic positioning of Bolivian wrestlers, I discuss how many of them understand the contrasting styles as contributing to or detracting from the international reputation of Bolivian wrestling.

Chapter four discusses some of the historical and contemporary cultural formations in Bolivia that are important to my discussions of lucha libre, and specifically the participation of the cholitas luchadoras. By placing these concepts within their cultural contexts, it becomes clear that discussions of authenticity and legitimacy must be understood as deeply rooted in Bolivian social formations. Authenticity, as a cultural value is used by the cholitas luchadoras in attracting both local and foreign audiences. Overall, this gives readers a sense of the cultural significance of the cholitas luchadoras performing in the wrestling rings of La Paz.

Chapter five explores the ways the luchadoras' performances have been consumed internationally. I examine foreign journalism about the cholitas luchadoras as well as advertisements created for foreigners by the tour companies that promote them. Here, issues of "otherness," touristic authenticity, and difference as a cultural value are addressed. The chapter closes with luchadoras' understandings of their shifting social positioning, and their resulting access to forms of capital and cosmopolitanism.

Finally, in chapter seven, I return to my own involvement in Super Catch, concentrating on my character, Lady Blade. Here I address the ways members of Super Catch claimed their own forms of cosmopolitanism in events and the implications of a visibly white woman wrestling among Bolivian luchadores. The subjects of nationalism, cosmopolitanism, race, gender, and different forms of capital are central, and help to illustrate how those involved in

lucha libre—both its production as well as spectators—understand the Bolivian nation in relation to processes of globalization.

Through these discussions, I explore the ways expressive behavior has shifted under pressures of globalization. The politics of lucha libre in La Paz and El Alto demonstrates how multiple realities may be reflected within a single performance form. Focusing on the production of the events and the actors' competing interests in shaping them provides a nuanced view of how social location is produced in co-constitutive and compounded ways. Super Catch luchadores and the luchadoras who perform as cholita characters work at their desires for cosmopolitanism through the same genre, but in strikingly different ways. The seemingly contradictory categories of tradition and modernity, the local and the global, and even authenticity and illegitimacy are disrupted and reshuffled opening up possibilities for new ways of mitigating a globally disadvantaged standing, while at the same time creating tensions between those who are similarly marginalized.



## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY: AN EMBODIED AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

On a sunny late-January day in 2012, I paced back and forth outside the entrance to “la Camacho,” a large plaza and market in central La Paz. The building was built much like a parking deck with a maze of five ramped levels of small stalls selling things like groceries, new books, used clothing, prepared foods, liquore, and cosmetics. The building was tall and provided some shade, which was lucky, because the sun had its usual bright, strong presence, and my light skin turned bright pink no matter how much sunscreen I slathered on. Like most gringos, I was a few minutes early, and like most Paceños, the men I was going to meet were habitually 15-30 minutes late. I paced because I was nervous. It was to be my first day of training as a luchadora with Super Catch, and I wanted desperately to prove myself as capable. After interviewing Edgar, the leader of the group, several times, he suggested I train with the group to gain a better understanding and I hoped that by doing so, and doing so seriously, I would become more than an anthropologist who was only superficially interested and prove myself to be worthy of my subject.

Edgar was the first to arrive, and we chatted as we waited for the others to arrive, discussing things like WWE<sup>2</sup> and the colors on a new costume Edgar wanted to create. And then, before my first training session, before I had ever tried a castigo, or attempted a llave, he asked me “Como quieres entrar?” [how do you want to enter (the ring)?]. And suddenly I realized, this is real!

How one “enters” the ring means much more than the physical act of moving from outside the ropes to the inside. Edgar’s question encapsulated things such as whether I wanted to

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<sup>2</sup> The U.S.’s most popular wrestling television program, World Wrestling Entertainment, formerly World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

be a *technica* or *ruda*, whether I would be acrobatic or brawny, what my costume would be, and even what my finishing move might entail. Having never trained as a wrestler before, the question felt a little premature to me. But it also made me realize that yes, I was actually going to learn to wrestle, and maybe even perform in the ring.

How exactly I would enter was not decided until late March, when we began making local TV appearances to promote our upcoming season. Having no idea where to begin, I gave Edgar almost-full license over how I would enter, though he asked me many more specific questions along the way. I was very clear that I wanted pants, not a skirt, and no midriff showing. He suggested I wear red, blue, and silver, and wear only an *antifaz* (half mask) so that my long hair would be clearly visible.

In early March, I met the Super Catch wrestlers on the corner near the studio of Chanel 18, TV Católica for our first television appearance. Located in an old 4-story house in Miraflores, the station manager led us to a back room, and everyone started changing into their *trajes*. Omar pulled out a bag with mine inside. When I saw it for the first time I couldn't help but smile. Though it had a lot of butterflies on it, which I wasn't necessarily thrilled about, it was a red, blue, and silver leotard, silver spandex pants, black boot covers, the *antifaz* we had discussed, and the *coup de grace*, a blue cape with silver lightening bolts.

That night I wrote in my fieldnotes

I felt like a superhero. Oh my god. And then, as if my 1980s sparkling US Olympic team gymnastics costume and silver spandex leggings were not enough, Oscar handed me a cape. A bright blue cape with silver lightening bolts. And then my manilas [wrist cuffs] were laced up. And then I put on my mask. I looked in the mirror. Yes, I was definitely some sort of superhero. When we walked off the tv stage, Victor told me "Pareces como Wonder Woman." I told him I felt like Wonder Woman. Everyone laughed, but it was true. The costume does something. It makes you feel like someone else.



Figure 5. A Publicity Photo Taken After Our Appearance on TV Católica

At this point, I still had no name, and in less than 10 minutes I would make my television premiere, so everyone sat down and starting throwing out ideas. Black Widow was the one I liked most, but we already had Black Spyder in the group and it seemed too similar. Someone suggested Lady Star, and Edgar like it because it was in English, but most Paceños know what both the words mean. There was some dissent, and suggestions that we should use the word “mariposa” [butterfly], because that is my favorite llave and my costume had butterflies on it. But I felt it was too “girly” and disagreed. Finally, Julién threw out a name we all agreed upon.

And so, I became Lady Blade.

### Spectatorship

I first arrived in La Paz for five weeks of preliminary research in July of 2009. During this time my research primarily took the form of being a lucha libre audience member. Armed with a new camera, a digital recorder, and notebook I set off on a Sunday afternoon to Ekko hostel where a friend of a friend in the U.S. had told me that the luchadoras provide tours to foreigners. I arrived around noon and was told by the receptionist to sign up on the list and return at 3:30 with 80 Bolivianos to pay the tour company. I did just that and took a 40 minute ride from the center of La Paz, to La Ceja [“The Brow”—because it is positioned like an eyebrow where the altiplano drops off into the valley where La Paz rests]. La Ceja is a busy market area, and in its center, with a view of the valley below, is the Multifuncional where Titanes del Ring perform each Sunday.

I had read many accounts of the luchadoras, both in reputable news outlets like the BBC and National Geographic, as well as online travel blogs. I had also seen countless youtube videos uploaded by tourists who had attended the shows, so nothing I saw that Sunday surprised me.

There were men in spandex costumes that would not have seemed out of place at a Halloween party, and of course the cholitas luchadoras wore the bowler hats, trenzas [braids], and polleras that had garnered international fame. The matches lacked the professional production value of WWE performances and the wrestlers were not as highly trained, but they used similar moves and showmanship. The wrestlers addressed the audience through the microphone, usually encouraging support from the audience or degrading their opponents. And the matches were genuinely humorous. Though I didn't fully understand all the jokes, I could pick up on many: cholitas used a bump from their buttocks—especially large according to local mythology—to send their opponents staggering around the ring, men's pants were pulled down, leaving them without balance and falling over, and several matches were interrupted by funny dances. Though the arena lacked heating like most buildings in La Paz and most of my limbs felt icy, I enjoyed the three-hour show.

I attended every week for the next month, continuing to take notes, photographs, short videos on my camera, and audio recordings of the audience cheering and luchadores' appeals to the audience. Rather than taking the tourist bus each time, I sometimes attended with my friend Ramiro, who grew up in El Alto, but had little interest in lucha libre, outside of practicing his English with me during matches.

It was during this field period that I secured my first interviews as well. I was able to interview Carlos, an avid fan and author of the blog [luchalibreboliviana.com](http://luchalibreboliviana.com). He also helped me get in touch with Juanita la Cariñosa and Kid Simonini to schedule an interview. Choosing to sit in the locals' section rather than the area reserved for tourists, I was also able to informally speak to the audience members around me at Titanes del Ring events. All this gave me a rough sense of the phenomenon from several different perspectives.

When I returned to La Paz in April of 2011, I continued attending Titanes del Ring matches, but also began attending the performances of LIDER, the group with whom Juanita and Simonini worked. LIDER wrestlers performed occasionally on Friday or Saturday nights in the Coloseo de Villa Victoria, located on a side street in the working class neighborhood of its namesake, Villa Victoria. Unlike at the Titanes del Ring events where tourists made up a good portion of the audience, I was the only gringa I could spot in the audience of 150 people. The first time I attended, a production team from a Venezuelan news program that was filming the event even interviewed me as “the foreigner” in attendance.<sup>3</sup>

Over the five months I spent in La Paz in 2011, I met many more luchadores (both men and women), trainers, tour operators, and publicity people through a snowball method. I conducted interviews with four of the cholitas luchadoras, six male luchadores, three trainers, and four people who worked in promoting the events. I conducted multiple interviews (sometimes 3 or 4) with several of them. I also attended events, either of Titanes del Ring and LIDER almost every week.

The week before leaving La Paz to return to the U.S. for several months, I interviewed Edgar a third time. He had called me at the last minute to change the day of the interview, so I arrived to the restaurant near the Perez Velasco without any pre-written questions. We ordered a two liter bottle of Coca-Cola to share, and as soon as he opened it, I discovered my recorder was out of batteries. Not knowing where exactly the conversation would go, I just started asking him to elaborate on anything I could think of that he had mentioned previously. Eventually, he was telling me about the ways that he hoped lucha libre would improve in the future, which led to detailed descriptions with what he felt was inadequate at the moment. In particular he mentioned

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<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, I found out in early 2012 that I didn’t make the final edit. I encountered a video of the broadcast on youtube.com while searching for a video from another date. It can be found at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38G\\_ZIP-8gE&list=PL2DED84BE0EFF758C](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38G_ZIP-8gE&list=PL2DED84BE0EFF758C)

that many luchadores in La Paz relied on gimmicks rather than on well-trained abilities. When I asked him to elaborate he became a little flustered trying to explain. He suggested that to get a better idea of what he meant, I train should with Super Catch when I returned the next year. “Si, claro! Parece una buena idea!” [Yes, sure! It seems like a good idea!] I said smiling, but thinking to myself that it would never happen.

### Training: Tijeras y Mariposas

When I emailed Edgar to tell him I would be returning in mid-January, he immediately reminded me of the plan for me to train. I hesitantly agreed, thinking that I’d only hurt myself or at very least turn out to be a clumsy mess. But I also realized, as such as Lock point out, the body as a mediator between the self and the world should be central to anthropology (Lock 1993:133). Following scholars such as Paul Stoller (1997), who established a framework of “sensuous scholarship,” and Heather Levi (2008) and Loic Wacquant (2004), who have trained in sport as part of the participatory research, I realized entering the lucha libre ring would improve my rapport with luchadores and give me access to conversations and spontaneous commentary that would not be available otherwise. But more importantly, these scholars note how using their bodies in research, often in painful and trying ways, gave them insight into the corporeal understandings of the individuals with whom they did research. Indeed, incorporating my own body, and merging the “intelligible and the sensible” (Stoller 1997:xv), seemed especially important given Barthes’s contention that it is “in the body of the wrestler that we find the first key to the contest” (2000:17). So, I felt that I simply couldn’t say no to an opportunity to build upon my understanding of the “intelligible” aspects of wrestling: stories, characters, political economic background, with experiences of the “sensible”: pain, training, technique.



But even with this in mind as I waited for Edgar and the rest of the Super Catch luchadores outside of Mercado Camacho, the idea of *actually* wrestling still seemed like a distant fantasy—almost impossible. When the group was fully assembled, there were eight of us: Myself and Edgar, Julién, Roberto, Miguel, Victor, Jorge, and Alvaro. After brief discussions outside the Camacho market, we walked together to the nearby park, locally known as Parque de los Monos [Monkey Park], but officially noted on maps as Parque Urbano (Figure 2). The park is cut into the side of the mountain, and is graded in hairpin turns, so that though it appears quite large on the map, at its widest point it is only about 10 meters. We found a small clearing with reasonably soft grass and started stretching.



Figure 6. Satellite Image of Central La Paz, with Parque de los Monos Dominating the Lower Right Part of the Image, and Mercado Camacho Visible in the Top Right Corner. Image © Google, 2013



The first thing I learned was to somersault. Or perhaps more precisely, I re-learned how to somersault. I first learned to somersault as a young girl. Growing up in a middle class family in the central United States, gymnastic lessons were practically requisite, and throughout my youth, the somersault felt innate to my body. In Parque de los Monos, after completing my first somersault ably, I couldn't help but smile. "Bien!" and "Eso!" several luchadores called out after seeing my attempt. However, for the purposes of wrestling, the somersault is performed with a  $\frac{3}{4}$  twist. One arm pushes and the other is folded in front of the chest so that the body twists slightly during the roll, and the somersaulter ends facing the direction from which they came. It was not hard to learn this new form, though even after several months of training it still felt slightly awkward compared to the fully forward roll I learned as a child. It was useful, allowing a wrestler to be thrown forward through the air yet still land on their back, or to easily regress in the direction from which they originated.

During the first training session I learned a number of different "claves" [acrobatic moves], which I only realized later was a clear indication from the start I would be a técnica. The first llave was the mariposa [butterfly]. In this move, I essentially did a cartwheel on the leg of another luchador, then locked their arm and threw them to the ground. I learned the cazador [hunter], in which I ran at the opposing luchador and leapt, twisting my body so that my legs locked around his waist with me facing the ground in a wheelbarrow-like stance. With his help, I then pushed myself back up parallel with him and locked arms, falling again into a sitting position and throwing him forward. I also learned the tijeras [scissors], which begins similarly to the mariposa, but ends with my legs wrapped around the luchador's neck as we spin in circles, eventually falling, and the arm lock sending him flying through the air.

In subsequent training sessions in Parque de los Monos, I learned tijeras directas [direct scissors], the same as tijeras normal, but in which my legs arrived around the luchador's neck with a simple upwards jump. I learned the trampolín [trampoline] where I jumped onto a luchador's bent legs, then pulled his whole body toward me as I fell backward, resulting in a double somersault and a submission hold (one that does not result in the referee counting for the end of the match, but is painful, and aimed at wearing down the opponent's stamina). The luchadores also taught me the alpin (alpine, named such because it looks something like a ski jump), in which I ran at a luchador and jumped up with their support, flew a short distance through the air with a straight back, before ducking my head and somersaulting into one or more luchadores standing behind the first, knocking them all to the floor. More advanced or brave luchadores landed squarely on their back on the floor of the ring rather than having their fall broken by other bodies. Finally, my favorite llave I learned in these training sessions was estaff [staff] in which I placed my foot in the locked hands of my partner while opponents held each of my hands. I jumped up into the air and did a backwards flip, still holding the opponents hands, which sent them flying backward as I landed on my feet.

Over the weeks I was trained to do short sprints (no small feat at just under 4000 meters) to keep my stamina in tact, and I learned how to fall without hurting myself. I had also been bitten by a street dog my first week in La Paz and was still undergoing a strict regimen of rabies vaccines when I began training, which left my arm muscles sore and the skin red and puffy, not to mention the nausea that followed the vaccine. In the second week I also cut my right hand rather severely on a glass that broke while I was washing dishes, and had a thick bandage covering it. Later the bandage was replaced with a bandana wrapped around my knuckles during

practice to keep the skin from splitting again. My abdomen, hamstrings and arm muscles were perpetually sore, and I was covered in strange bruises and abrasions.

Many wrestling critics, most notable Barthes in his famous essay, “The World of Wrestling,” contend that it is not a sport, but pure spectacle (2000). However, as Grindstaff and West point out, theatrical aspects of performance are often placed in contrast to sport, but in a number of athletic contests planned performance for an audience is integral to the activity (2006:508-509). Thus, to discount wrestling as non-sport because of its planned performative aspects disregards the athletic stamina and skill necessary to execute flying summersaults and two-person flips. For almost twenty years I have participated in organized sports including basketball, gymnastics, volleyball, long distance running, softball, and soccer. Often my body felt more destroyed after a long lucha libre training session than after practicing for these more “conventional” sports.

The first few weeks of training were physically quite rough on me, but my growing excitement about wrestling and the adrenaline from training kept me going. Indeed I learned most important secret of lucha libre: *not* whether it is real or fake, *not* whether it is choreographed or improvised, *not* whether winners are real or pre-determined, *not* even whether the pain is real or exaggerated. What I learned was that despite the pain, it is *fun*. And people do it because its fun. And people enjoy watching it because its fun. And people build their lives around it, and are passionate about it, and love it because its *fun*.

Less fun for me were the castigos [punishments]. Edgar encouraged me to emphasize the pain. “Agarra tu pierna” [Grab your leg] he would tell me after kicking my knee. “No te olvides de mostrar que te lastima” [Don’t forget to show it hurts you]. So I finally learned the exaggeration bit. Barthes writes that the signs in wrestling are “endowed with an absolute clarity,

since one must always understand everything on the spot” (2000:16). However, Edgar cautioned me, much as Barthes writes “if gesture appears as no more than a symbol, this is going too far, this is transgressing the moral rules of wrestling, where all signs must be excessively clear, but must not let the intention of clarity be seen” (2000:20).

Thus, the importance of learning to give castigos became clear. I was criticized over and over because my kicks, punches, and slaps were not convincing enough. “Isn’t wrestling supposed to be fake? I don’t want to actually hurt anyone,” I always thought to myself. I learned a move that involved twisting my opponent’s arm and pushing them down from behind. “Tambien es bueno para autodefensa!” [Its also good for self defense] Edgar reminded me. I learned moves in which I kicked the opponent’s own feet out from under them or kicked the back of the knee to make them fall. But Edgar always told me to hold tighter, push harder, don’t stop until they tap my leg to let me know its too much. I understood, but it was not a natural response for me. I often released a hold almost immediately, not wanting to cause real pain. Maintaining a hold or pushing a limb beyond what seemed comfortable took a lot of conscious effort on my part and was always frustrating (for both of us).

And even some claves were frustrating to learn. As I progressed I began to learn harder moves, like la tony (in which I was to swing around the shoulders of another luchador) or the double tijeras (in which I was expected to swing around the luchador’s body anchored by my legs around their neck, then release my legs, swing them around as well without touching the ground and re-anchor them around the luchador’s neck a second time). These two moves took several weeks to be able to do marginally well. Edgar would always respond with first exclaiming something like “Falta enganchar!” [You’re missing the strangle!—referring to my

legs around the neck] or “No! Tienes que poner tus piernas aqui!” [No! You have to put your legs here!]. It was in these moments I became aware how easy it usually was for me.

Edgar often further frustrated me by implying that just knowing what I *should* do would immediately enable me to be able to execute the llave. When the luchadores would demonstrate a new move and ask if I could do it I would usually respond “Creo que si” [I think so], “Tal vez” [maybe], or “A ver” [Let’s see]. Though I was far more willing to try new things than some other new luchadores who came to train occasionally, my willingness to try was not always enough. Edgar expected me to give a definitive “yes.” For many of the luchadores, the body was not separate from the mind. That is, luchadores commonly reject the Cartesian dualism found in Western conceptions of the mind as the “internal, nonmaterial locus of rationality, thought, language, and knowledge” while the body is regarded as the “mechanical, sensate, material locus of rationality and feeling” (Farnell 1999:345). Instead they acted according to the belief that an understanding of how the move should be done was enough to successfully complete the llave after two or three attempts.

Though intellectually I recognized a clear separation between mind and body as impossible, I experienced my own body differently. At times I felt alienated from a body that just would not cooperate. Much as scholars suggest that pain and disability create a heightened awareness of the body (Fine and Asch 1988, French 1994, Leder 1990:69, 80, Murphy 1987), these moments also sensitized my awareness. “Yo entiendo, pero mis piernas no llegan!” [I understand how, but my legs don’t go there] I would grunt. Unlike claves such as mariposa and tijeras, which by this point had become second nature, my body felt fragmented during these moments. If I paid attention to getting my legs in the right place, my arms moved too slowly. If I got all the limbs in the right places at the right times, I would forget to twist my torso. When the

motion did not immediately make sense to me, I had to walk through each intricate detail of the llave: Does my hand go on the knee or the thigh? Do I jump with one foot or two? And does the jump come at the same time as hand placement or just after? Thus, during these times, rather than my body feeling like a unified whole, I experienced it as fragmented; hands and legs working independently, rather than together in a fluid motion. My mind became slightly detached from my body parts, and only upon being able to do the claves without thinking did I finally feel my mind and all the body parts were completely reunited. When I quickly and easily executed a llave correctly, it just felt “natural.” I was not overly aware of where my hands and legs were placed or at what moment I twisted my back.

However, the joy of finally accomplishing a tough llave re-unified my sense of my body, making me feel as if it finally “worked” properly, and wrestling became fun again. Though I did finally get la tony, I never successfully completed tijeras dobles. But as the first match neared, Edgar and I went back to perfecting the basics—the moves I would use in performance.

In late February, we began training in a ring to prepare for upcoming performances. The ring was located in Los Andes in El Alto. Getting there from central La Paz required taking a mini bus to La Ceja in El Alto, then another down Avenida 16 de Julio, beyond Plaza La Paz, almost all the way to Villa Esperanza and the Universidad Pública de El Alto. From there, we would call Don Mauricio, the owner of the ring from a payphone, and walk two more blocks down an alley-like street to a big metal door that led to his home and yard [Map 1]. When we entered the first time, it seemed more like a junkyard than a home, but I quickly realized all the random pieces of metal piping and wood flats lying about were actually parts of the ring [Figure 3]. We all set about constructing the shabby ring, and each gave the owner two Bolivianos for its use. After thirty minutes, I was ready to step inside for the first time.

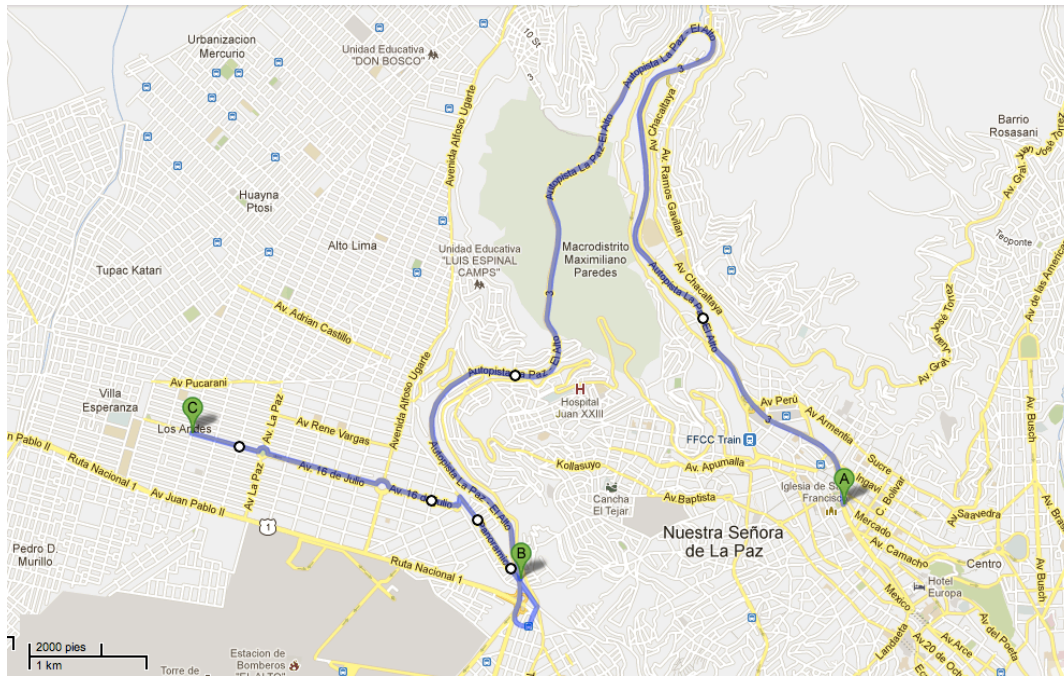


Figure 7. Map of the Route to Don Mauricio's Practice Ring. Map © Google, 2013



Figure 8. Constructing the Ring at Don Mauricio's house

We began as usual with stretching and somersaults, enjoying the feeling of wood covered in a thick blanket beneath us, which was much softer than the hard ground beneath the grass of Parque de los Monos. We then practiced falling some more, this time with someone actually throwing us to the ground. We practiced the usual claves—mariposas, cazadores, and tijeras—bouncing off the cords for more momentum. Then I learned the really fun stuff: jumping from the ropes. First came the angel [angel], jumping from the top rope twisting the body so that it lands perpendicular to the one or two luchadores standing below who break the fall. I also learned the piscina [pool], usually done from the top rope onto the floor outside of the ring in which the jumper spreads their arms wide as if they are doing a bellyflop into a pool, and push down backwards the two luchadores standing below to break the fall. I even learned to do this move with a running start from the floor of the ring, jump over the top rope, and onto the floor below. With these moves reasonably comfortable Edgar declared “Ya estas lista!” [You’re ready!].

What he meant is that I had developed enough of what Loïc Wacquant refers to as “bodily capital.” Drawing from Bourdieu, he defines capital as accumulated labor that enables agents to “appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor” (1986:241). Thus, the boxers on whom Wacquant focuses convert “abstract” bodily capital into “pugilistic capital” in which the body has “abilities and tendencies liable to produce value in the field of professional boxing in the form of recognition, titles, and income streams (1995:66-67). A similar form of capital exists in wrestling, consisting not only in abilities to perform claves, but also in “selling” castigos, and how one enters. In addition, the ability to appear well in forms of publicity was another important form of bodily capital.



### “Todo es Publicidad”

As the first event of the season grew near the Super Catch wrestlers appeared on several television stations to publicize. As I mentioned in the opening section of this chapter, the first was on TV Católica. “Todo es publicidad” [publicity is everything] Edgar whispered to me as we walked through the front door, just adding to my nervousness. After my stage name was finally settled in the dressing room, I was given several tips by Edgar and Victor. The most important to them, based on their endless repetition, was “puro ingles” [pure English]. I didn’t argue, thinking I would be less nervous about speaking English rather than Spanish on a program that was broadcast throughout the country.

But their motivations for my language choice had little to do with my comfort. It was part of the character. We developed a whole backstory. Lady Blade had come to Bolivia to learn a different style of lucha libre. I was to use the name of a former wrestling group several of my friends from high school had started in the late 1990s—FUW, the Federation of United Wrestlers<sup>4</sup>. I was to specifically name my *profes* [professors]: Disco Stu, Violent JT, Mad Dawg, and Honkey Tonk Rob. The truth was I had never wrestled with FUW—though I did help sew some of the costumes and set up the ring a few times. But I had learned a seemingly-infinite amount from them about professional wrestling, at least in the U.S. context. I checked with those former FUW members I could track down, and they didn’t have a problem with me claiming to hail from the now defunct group, so we set about developing the story.

The story went as such: Lady Blade, after five years of wrestling with FUW in the U.S. decided she needed to learn different styles and embarked on an educational trip to Bolivia. There she was training with the luchadores of Super Catch in order to improve her acrobatic

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4 Strangely enough, during the time of my involvement with FUW, Larry McBride, an anthropology student at Illinois State University began studying the group for his undergraduate thesis. He later wrote about FUW in his Master’s Thesis (2005:6).

abilities. She was also especially interested in wrestling the cholitas luchadoras to prove that women around the world were just as capable of athletic competition as men. This all allowed me to espouse pro-nationalist U.S. rhetoric (chanting “USA!” as I entered the ring, among other things) while remaining a técnica in the eyes of the Bolivian public.

Knowing that I would always wrestle as part of a tag team, we included a tag team partner in Lady Blade’s back story. When my friend Elijah came to visit from the U.S. we brought him to an appearance on the Univisión program “Revista.” Quickly coming up with the name “Razor” he became my tag team partner and Edgar taught him a few moves so he could participate in the on-air brawl that would take place. And in order to highlight my status as a técnica and buena, between the three of us we decided that he should act as a rudo. On the TV appearance he constantly belittled Bolivian luchadores, suggesting if they really wanted to learn to wrestle they could only do so by coming to the United States and studying with wrestlers there.

Even after the season began, we continued making TV appearances to promote our events on TV Católica, TV Palenque, and RTP Bolivia. We also appeared on Univision four times in March and April, always on the morning program, Revista. This is a morning news magazine show combining serious news stories, public interest issues, and promotions for various local events. There were always groups of young dancers or beauty pageant contestants waiting to go on after us. One time, performers from the circus that had recently arrived in La Paz performed an acrobatic routine before we appeared.

My most visceral realization from these appearances was similar to the discontinuity of understanding how to do a llave and not being able to. I realized my stance, my walk, my gestures, my general embodiment was not that of a luchadora. In the TV appearances, most of

the time is spent standing in a group listening to the TV personality or other luchadores speak. And though I was never a good actress I spent enough time in play productions in high school, and required acting classes for a performance studies degree as an undergraduate to know that the way your body rests on stage is just as important as the way you move. These teachings reflect anthropological notions about bodily movement such as Mauss's suggestion that there is no "natural" way to walk (1973:72). Instead he sees all movement as socially mediated and transmitted. Movement has meaning, and can be interpreted. As humans, our bodily action is laden with cultural and social significance, and is often employed intentionally to communicate something about ourselves (Gibson 1979:218-219).

Movement can also be read as a kind of "truth" in which I worried that if I moved incorrectly, if I seemed too weak or timid I would certainly be given away as less than a legitimate luchadora. In Goffman's vocabulary, I lacked the "body idiom" of a luchadora. I had not yet become adept at communicating the "conventionalized vocabularies of gestures/postures and the corporeal rules" (1959:13-14) for demonstrating a convincing performance of "being" a wrestler.

I learned quite quickly that I could not replicate the muscular, inflated chest, intimidating stance and walk that the men around me performed. As Iris Marion Young writes, men and women often sit, stand, and walk with different bodily style and extension (1980:145). She suggests women are more tentative, trusting their bodies less (1980:146), which might certainly explain my hesitancy to say "yes," as Edgar hoped, when presented with trying new claves. Young attributes this to aspects of patriarchy which place women's bodies under more scrutiny: "We feel as though we must have our attention directed upon our bodies to make sure they are doing what we wish them to do, rather than paying attention to what we want to do though our

bodies” (1980:147). At times in training and certainly on television I was hyper-aware of the way my body was moving, second guessing every movement.

I began to watch Edgar, Diego, and Eduardo to see how they moved. They are all big and muscular (at least for Bolivians), and their movements were exaggerated but not far from their usual bodily stance. Edgar in particular was overly expressive with his body when wearing a wrestling mask, gesturing broadly, but always with a natural movement. I, on the other hand, had never learned to use my presence for intimidation, and my preoccupation with how to hold my body only made my stance and gestures more awkward. I could see my body on the monitor as the camera panned past me, and I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I have always inhabited a body that felt slightly awkward, and broad movements do not come naturally. My costume helped. It did give me a certain air of dignity—a model-like walk, confidence, chest forward, shoulders back, and straight spine. But still, I did not feel exactly like a luchadora should. After the appearance on TV Católica I went home and stood in front of a mirror trying to figure out how to replicate the more muscular stances. I decided I needed inspiration, a corporeal back story. Taking a cue from Victor’s suggestion that I looked like Wonder Woman, I decided I would attempt to move as a superhero would. Not with brawny force (which I clearly didn’t have hidden in my body frame), but with agility.

I googled Wonder Woman and found that she is a “distinctly feminist role model whose mission was to bring the Amazon ideals of love, peace, and sexual equality to a world torn by the hatred of men” (Crawford, 2007). Despite the essentialist undertones, “I can work with that,” I thought. In the first episode of the TV program, *Super Friends*, Wonder Woman tells Aquaman, “the only thing that can surpass super-strength is the power of the brain.” She is not immortal, but I liked that she can shrug off even rifle fire. She can fly. And perhaps appropriately for a

Lady Blade inspiration, her original costume was based on the American flag, because, according to the first issue of Sensation Comics, at that time she was a “purely American icon.” So, in moments when I did not know how to move as Lady Blade, I thought of Wonder Woman.

Diana Taylor writes, “We learn and transmit knowledge through embodied action, through cultural agency, and by making choices. Performance, for me, functions as an episteme, a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis” (2003:xvi). In practicing movements and poses in front of my mirror I learned not only how to perform with the body I have, but also how learning lucha libre can affect the body, and how it communicates and authenticates its stories not only through the matches’ actions, but through the mundane movements and stances as well. With an increasingly more comfortable posture on television appearances, I added another feature of bodily capital important for being a successful wrestler.

### Entering the Ring

With publicity well underway, I began marking moves and choreographing with my opponents for the event. It was to be a tag-team match where I wrestled with Kazama as my partner against Betty la Super Cholina and Edgar. This meant that after a brief encounter with Betty, I would end up wrestling Edgar (in the costume of Lince). Though by this time I felt completely comfortable with several moves with Edgar, I was worried about wrestling Betty, because I had yet to meet her.

We finally met on a corner of Avenida 16 de Julio in El Alto, near our usual practice ring. I was standing with Edgar, Miguel, Julian, and Alvaro when she hopped out of a minibus and approached us. She had her long black hair in a bun with a large poofy embellishment, and wore purple track pants and a matching purple sweater. She was fully accessorized with earrings and bracelets, and had on full face cosmetics. She greeted Edgar warmly and kissed the cheeks of the

other luchadores, but completely ignored me. Finally, Edgar introduced me, indicating that I would be her opponent. To this she just looked at me and laughed. “Es demasiada alta!” [She’s too tall] she exclaimed and rolled her eyes. She was right. She was about half a meter shorter, but was much wider than my slender-ish frame. But with her comment, my heart sank. I was less concerned about actually wrestling, but I had always intended to write about the cholitas luchadoras, not the male luchadores of Super Catch. I had anticipated a wonderful entrance into another dimension of the cholitas luchadoras wrestling, training, and general lives, by wrestling Betty in the ring. But before I could get too worried, Edgar explained that we would only do a few moves together before he would enter the ring and take over. She finally agreed and we all walked around the corner to the backyard ring.

Unfortunately, as we pounded on the metal door, the owner, Don Mauricio never opened the door. After much wasted time, Edgar returned to the pay phone and called another La Paz lucha libre trainer who had a ring. We bussed all the way back to the center of La Paz, then boarded a different minibus bound for Plaza Callapa. We all exited the bus and walked along a path on the mountainside toward the owner’s house. When we arrived he had no doorbell, so Edgar and Eduardo resorted to shouting. When this came to no avail, Edgar climbed back to the plaza and called. Finally, Don Carlos opened his gate and we set about setting up the ring.

However, this “ring” was quite different from the last. In the middle of his dirt yard was a large pile of sawdust mixed with earth. We smoothed this down using 2x4 wood pieces, then placed several layers of tarps over it. We stuck natural wood poles into pre-dug holes on the four corners and placed string between them for cords. I was unsure this was any more helpful than practicing in the Parque de los Monos. But it at least gave us a sense of the size of the ring, and Betty and I practiced several moves together, figuring out what worked and what did not.

The next Sunday we returned to Don Mauricio's ring, and during the warm up I realized something was very wrong with my back. The somersaults hurt. I was fine doing mariposas or tijeras, but as soon as my back touched the ring floor pain shot in all directions. I briefly stepped out of the ring to stretch and after five minutes tried again. This time it was worse. My back muscles were spasming. I stepped out again, and despite Victor's constant nagging me to get back in the ring, I knew I couldn't. I kept stretching, walking slowly around the ring in Don Mauricio's yard, mostly to keep up appearances that I hadn't given up. Luis, a doctor in his day job, eventually told me I should just rest. Edgar and I were both worried because the first event was that Friday.

### The Show

After two months of training and more than a dozen television appearances, we were finally ready for the first show of the season. We had rented out the Coloseo de Villa Victoria, a building that more resembles a warehouse with bleachers than a sports arena. Villa Victoria is a neighborhood of La Paz that sits high on the mountain, much closer to El Alto than the center of the city. The socio-economics of the area are also more similar to El Alto's with working class citizens, bare-bones houses and buildings, and plenty of corner stores and lunch restaurants, but not a single supermarket or office building.

After seeing a LIDER event in the Coloseo the year before, I had some idea of where it was but did not know exactly how to get there. I was to meet Edgar at the cemetery at 3pm so we could travel together, but at 2:30 he sent me a text message saying he was already in Villa Victoria with the ring and I would have to go on my own. Though he told me which minibus to take, I wasn't exactly confident and took a taxi instead. As we passed the tiny snack window labeled "Pollos Kintuky" [Kintuky Chicken] (I assumed trying to profit from the popularity of

name but absence of Kentucky Fried Chicken in Bolivia), I recognized it and knew the coloseo was around the corner.

The taxi pulled up in front of the entrance, to the side of which a Super Catch banner had already been hung from the bricks, depicting several luchadores who either currently or had formerly performed with the group. The entrance was closed off by a giant metal gate, so I called Edgar to let me inside. Instead, a little old Bolivian woman (only about 4 feet 6 inches tall) opened the gate and showed me to the arena room.

The ring was still being constructed (Figure 4) and I grew slightly more worried. We were a mere three hours away from the event starting, and I still had very little idea what my match would entail. I knew that I would begin wrestling Betty, and after a few claves, Big Boy would enter the ring to finish the match against me. Edgar and I had a good repertoire, but I wanted to be able to practice exactly what would happen between us. Even more-so I wanted to be able to mark the moves I would do with Betty to be sure we were ready. By the state of the ring though, this was looking more and more unlikely to happen.



Figure 9. Don Mauricio's Ring is Constructed in the Coloseo de Villa Victoria.



Indeed, it was not until 10 minutes before the match that the three of us discussed exactly how it would work. Over the course of the conversation the plan kept changing as well. I had assumed there would be more rehearsal, but I was wrong. I entered the ring with an idea of what claves worked well for the people involved, but no idea which ones we would use, or in what order.

Inevitably, there were minor flaws in the performance. Edgar and Victor told me that I worked too slowly. I grabbed Betty in a way that crushed her hand at one point. But overall, it was agreed among the luchadores that the match was adequate, and I personally felt that it hadn't been overly apparent that I had never performed in the ring before. The audience had reacted favorably to me, even with my "USA!" chants, and several children posed with me for pictures after the show. I had survived my first public in-ring encounter.

During the match, everything else disappeared from my consciousness. I was fixated on doing claves well, and had totally lost a sense of other bodily sensations. As I walked back into the locker room, I realized my mouth was so dry I could not swallow. I felt very similar to McBride's comments after his first experience participating in exhibition wrestling:

I recall not feeling the blow of hitting the floor after falling from the ring, and I recall a hazy inability to estimate how long I had been performing. Being in the ring had seriously altered my sense of the passage of time (2005:19).

I could hardly believe I had actually gotten through the match. My body hurt, but I couldn't stop smiling. I was hungry, but full of energy. I couldn't sit down. I wanted to giggle and jump. Instead I posed for pictures with kids in the hallway, I posed for pictures with fellow Super Catch luchadores in the locker room, and then I helped dismantle the ring. After this we lined up and were each given 40 Bolivianos (about \$6 US) from the profits. The rest were kept to pay for renting and transporting the ring, along with the fee for using the coloseo. Our energy bubbling over, instead of taking taxis, we all walked 40 minutes from Villa Victoria, past the

cemetery, to the neighborhood of San Pedro where I lived. It's a dangerous walk for 1:00 am, but we were a group of 12 luchadores (along with Edgar's mother), with plenty of adrenaline racing through our veins, and I got home without incident. It was only next day, when the adrenaline had worn off, that I noticed the abrasions and bruises all over my body.

### Secrecy

Aside from the physical stress, lucha libre also caused a fair amount of emotional stress for me. Most of the Super Catch wrestlers wore masks while performing, and kept their identities a secret. Much like the famous Mexican wrestlers who first trained Bolivian luchadores, Super Catch wrestlers believed that concealing identity was an important part of luchadores' enigma. Indeed, it was this connection to Mexican wrestling that made it such an important directive. Placing importance on secrecy not only paid respect to the famous Mexican wrestlers who came to Bolivia in the 1950s and 1960s, but also connected Super Catch to the practices of Mexican lucha libre in the present and was symbolic of subscribing to international customs which in the luchadores minds elevated their performances to an international level.

I was told during the first training session to not reveal that I was wrestling to any of my Bolivian friends. Because I would be wearing a mask, my identity would be a secret. That meant that I should not mention to my friends in La Paz that I was training or performing with Super Catch. Though certainly near the end of my fieldwork and involvement in lucha libre there were friends whom I really wanted to tell, I also felt allegiance to the secrecy the luchadores of Super Catch requested.

As Heather Levi points out, lucha libre is known for the "public secret" surrounding the fixity of matches (which I addressed above) (2008:27). But she continues, "Yet the secret of the fixed ending is only one of a number of back secrets, of stories told and stories hidden, of secrets

revealed to conceal still others. The secrecy of the fix stands for a series of dissimulations, for the mystery that animates the genre” (2008:31).

Though Edgar had specifically requested that I not tell any Bolivians about my involvement, I also hesitated to tell the secret to my few friends in La Paz who were also foreigners. The La Paz/El Alto urban area, despite having about 2.3 million residents, often feels like the small town of 2000 where I grew up. Its not uncommon to run into friends on busy sidewalks, and everyone knows everyone else. As I began training, I learned by chance that my friend David, a 25 year old from Seattle, had dated the niece of a famous cholita luchadora for two years. Trying to be helpful, he offered to put me into contact with luchadoras and trainers. Near the end of my time practicing with Super Catch, I told him my secret, and was slightly disappointed he had never caught wind of the amazing Lady Blade.

During our first event in Villa Victoria, my reasons for being guarded were confirmed. When I arrived at the that afternoon, the La Paz reporting team for the Associated Press was there to interview me. Edgar warned me ahead of time and insisted I put on my mask before going to meet them. This seemed silly at first, but when I walked into the room I realized that the British woman who was to interview me I had previously met several times. I first met her at the birthday party of my friend Sioban, an Irish woman who worked at a NGO supporting “orphaned and abused children” in La Paz. Sioban was also friends with several of my Bolivian friends. But more importantly than the fear that Sioban could leak the secret to our mutual Bolivian friends was the power this woman possessed as a journalist. If she were to recognize me and wanted to make my identity public, she could. Of course, I doubt she would have any interest in doing so, but in the moment I felt truly worried that she would figuratively “unmask” me.

But even among people who were very much “in on the secret,” of my character, Lady Blade, other elements of secrecy remained important. When my friend Jason visited from the US and came to see our second show in Villa Victoria, he arrived with me at the coloseo several hours before the first match. Mercedes, another luchadora wrestling that night first asked if he was my husband. When I told her that he was not, she responded that I’d have to ask him to wait in the hall until the audience was let in. “Se estropea el show” [It spoils the show] she said, “Tenemos que guardar nuestros secretos” [We have to keep our secrets] she explained. So Jason waited in the lobby, and ended up discussing politics with Berta, the little old Bolivian woman who had let me into the Coloseo the week before. Contrarily, when my parents and sister came to a match, they were allowed to watch us rehearse before the event and snap an embarrassing amount of photos. There seemed to be an invisible line in relationships delineating who was close enough to “know” and who was not. Parents, spouses, and siblings were allowed in on the secret, but friends were not.

In a place where I had no family (aside from a 10 day visit) or spouse, I never had a good way of determining whom I should tell and whom I should not. And though I never wanted to distort the truth, I found that maintaining the confidentiality requested by my luchador colleagues often meant I had to be evasive with other acquaintances in La Paz. I made excuses for the 7-8 hours I would spend training in El Alto. I would either say that I had several interviews back to back or that I was meeting with a “community group.” But the most amusing questions were about the bruises and scratches I amassed. After performing in a match on Friday evening, I went to a club Saturday night. I was wearing a tank top and a friend noticed the bruises on my arms. Upon inspecting them, he discovered the giant red floorburns I had on both elbows. “Wait what did you do last night again?” he asked. He raised his eyebrows a few times to suggest it might be

something scandalous. It was fortunate that he was then interrupted by another friend with an unrelated story, because I had no idea how to answer.

With these evasions, I experienced what is a way of life for many luchadores. Indeed, there are numerous myths about the famous Mexican luchadores of the 1950s who never removed their masks outside of their homes. And it is the secrecy that masking represents that lends allure to *lucha libre*. The masks are sources of power, and—as is evident in the many Mexican matches in which the loser gives up his mask (and thus reveals his or her identity)—losing the mask is a source of shame and weakness.

Levi discusses the origin of the wrestling mask and traces it back to the 1930s (2008:105). Because masks are used in ritual in Mexico, and quite visibly in festival parades in Bolivia and throughout Latin America, it was surprising to learn that the first wrestler to wear a mask was “The Masked Marvel” from the United States (2008:105). Masks were later popularized when the Mexico City shoemaker, Antonio H. Martínez began making them, first for Cyclone MacKay from the United States, and then for El Murciélago [The Bat] Velasquez in 1936 (Levi 2008:110).

By the 1950s—the era when Mexican luchadores first traveled to Bolivia—masks were ubiquitous in *lucha libre*. In fact, as Levi notes, “the wrestling mask came to symbolize the sport itself” (2008:105). Thus, when Huracán Ramírez, Rayo de Jalisco, and Lizmark began performing and later training luchadores in La Paz, the mask was closely associated with Mexican *lucha libre*. Today, it retains this association. To put on the mask in Bolivia inevitably references not only the historical antecedents of *lucha libre* in Mexico, but also a global process of flexible accumulation that occurred as exhibition wrestling and its traditions spread from the United States to Mexico, to Bolivia and the rest of Latin America.

Today in La Paz, about two-thirds of male wrestlers wear masks. In addition to myself, I only know of two Paceña luchadoras who also wore masks (with polleras). Jennifer Dos Caras, is the only Bolivian woman in the four groups mentioned previously that does not always wrestle de pollera. She alternates between costumes that are de vestido and de pollera, but never wears a mask (despite the fact that her stage name begs for masking). Thus, for the luchadores of Super Catch, masking is also something that represents the global nature of wrestling, and international legitimacy in contrast to the local phenomenon of the cholitas luchadoras.

But to truly understand the importance of masking, an examination of unmasking is vital. Levi (2008:105) discusses two similar situations in Mexico, in which unmasking was used (or at least attempted) to diminish the power of a luchador and a political figure. When the famous wrestler Hijo del Santo [Son of El Santo—one of Mexico's most legendary wrestlers] was divorcing his wife, she published unmasked pictures of him in a local newspaper. Similarly, in 1995 the attorney general's office released photos they claimed were of the leader of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional [National Zapatista Liberation Force], Subcomandante Marcos, who always wears a ski mask in public. Levi points out that the next day's New York Times featured a quote from an anonymous Mexican government official who clearly stated that "The moment that Marcos was identified and his photo was shown and everyone saw who he was, much of his importance as a symbol vanished. Whether he is captured or not is incidental" (in Golden 1995, 1). In the end, both men denied the pictures were actually of themselves, and eventually the controversies blew over. But in both cases, the unmasking parties assumed that so doing would greatly diminish these public figures' allure and social capital. Though their efforts were not necessarily successful, this assumption clearly reveals the social power of the mask, as understood by a broad audience.

This power attributed to the practice of masking was experienced by Super Catch luchadores as well. Julién once told me that “A la gente [en el público] le atrae más la máscara...A la gente le importas mientras usas la máscara y que estas sobre el ring...Una vez que pasa eso te sacas la máscara y a nadie le importas. La vida de un luchador es un poco triste” [People (in the audience) are more attracted to the mask...to the people you are more important when you use the mask in the ring. When you take off your mask no one cares about you. The life of a wrestler is a little sad]. Julién reveals that not only does masking create a sense of intrigue, but also signifies one as a luchador. When the mask is removed, no one pays attention. In essence, the mask connotes that performance is taking place. Something that is not “literal” takes place within the ring. In Richard Bauman’s (see also Desmond 1999:214) words, “There is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, ‘interpret what I say in some special sense’” (1975:292). The mask signifies to the audience to pay attention. Without the mask, “no one cares about you.”

My experience was slightly different. Without the mask I still attracted attention. It was obvious to fans that peered through gaps in the sheets we had hung over the chain link fence outside the basketball court in Villa Armonía, that the blonde gringa helping to set up the ring was indeed Lady Blade, no matter how many times I denied my alter ego to eight year old boys. But wearing the mask in the ring still transformed my corporeality and mentality.

As we discussed further, Julién revealed that for him, the mask helped him in the ring. “A mí en lo personal, oculta mis miedos que llevo. Una vez que luchas con máscara te entra una forma de ser, un yo que no conocía! Es sorprendente saber que puedes hacer cosas o movimientos en la lucha, porque la máscara te da confianza de ti mismo. Para mí la mascara es como un amuleto!” [For me personally, it hides my fears. If you wrestle with a mask you enter a

form of being, a self you didn't know! Its surprising to know that you can do things or movements in wrestling, because the mask gives you self confidence. For me the mask is like a charm!].

The use of masking in strict theatrical contexts is often spoken about in similar ways. Several theater scholars (Emigh 1996, Lecoq 2002, Rudin and Crick 2001) suggest that within masks lie a special or sacred power. Indeed, Rudin and Crick write that “Ideally, one would ask the Masks who they would like to be worn by. Enthusiasm (literally being possessed by the god of the Mask) is a basic criterion” (Rudin 2001:137). Lecoq explains in simpler terms that the mask allows actors to perform something other than themselves “while nevertheless investing themselves deeply in the performance. They have learned not to play *themselves* but to play *using* themselves” (2002:61, emphasis in original). He also notes that the mask allows actors to separate themselves from their “social masks,” giving them more freedom, and sometimes producing unsuspected behavior (2002:147).

Lecoq goes on to discuss the ways masks may precipitate a change in the actor's entire corporeality (2002:117-118), describing something similar to what I experienced in attempting to take on a bodily stance for Lady Blade. When putting on the mask, I consciously attempted to *become* Lady Blade. With Wonder Woman in mind, I thought to myself, “How would Lady Blade address the audience? How would Lady Blade react to insults? How would Lady Blade take defeat? How would Lady Blade cheer after her own victory?” And though I often spoke, it was always in English and I knew that very few people would understand, so corporeality became my primary mode of communication.

However, it was my corporeality that eventually gave me away. Only about five of my close Bolivian friends were in on my secret, but I found out I was more recognizable than I had



hoped. One weekend as I walked into a local restaurant I saw a big group of young Bolivians, some of which were my acquaintances. As I did my rounds saying hello, Ique who works for the La Paz Cultural Council, told me “Te vi en la tele hoy!” [I saw you on TV today]. I acted confused. And to an extent I was. It had been at least a month since we had last had a publicity appearance. “Estabas con tu máscara pero yo sé que eras tu” [You had your mask on but I know it was you], he continued. And then I remembered that we had filmed public service announcements for TV Palanque the month before that were finally playing during commercial breaks on the station. Indeed, my gringa appearance and English speaking voice gave me away, even under the Lady Blade mask. Ique pointed out that my hair, and particularly my body movements were clear indications that it was me. Even with all that practice being a super hero in front of the mirror, my movements revealed who I was. I winked at Ique and told him it was a secret identity. He didn’t say anything else that night, but in the coming months when we saw each other he would spend hours asking me questions about lucha libre, despite what seemed to me to be my clear hesitation to talk about it.

In the end, what began as simple allegiance to the request of the group with whom I was participating, became something more embodied. It made me physically nervous when Ique would ask questions. When another friend was looking at the pictures on my digital camera and passed by one of me in costume I gasped even though she didn’t notice at all. And a few times, I set out to tell good friends the secret, but started to feel sick to my stomach and aborted the plan.

Similarly, writing about these secrets in some ways feels like a betrayal. The members of Super Catch knew from my first day of training (and Edgar long before) that I would be writing about lucha libre, and my participation would be part of that. But secrecy became such an important task, and my involvement with the group became such a personal investment that I still

struggle with the dilemma. However, as Levi writes in her book, “The secrets I did learn—the techniques and the feeling—are still locked in my body. I feel no compunction about revealing them...because I know that these secrets cannot really be communicated through text (2008:47). Though it is secrecy that in many ways endows lucha libre with its enigmatic power, my words here will never be able to fully communicate what it is like to try a llave for the first time, to finally master a move that had been elusive, to put on a mask, to contemplate how Wonder Woman would react, or to climb to the top rope and raise your arms in victory as the audience cheers.

### Becoming an Authentic Luchadora

Overall I trained in wrestling for ten months and performed in seven events. Initially, it just felt like a game, but in the end I too began to take seriously the ways wrestling is portrayed to a larger audience. Luchadores commit to countless hours training, not only in the ring, but in parks, on weight machines, running, in boxing gyms, and doing sit ups in their bedrooms. They spend more time developing characters, drawing mock ups of costumes, and planning and practicing how they will address the audience. They suffer bruises, sore abdomens, cuts on their faces, strained back muscles, sprained ankles, and scarred elbows and knees. This is not a job from which they gain sufficient money to support themselves. Every luchador has another source of income, but still commit to several hours of training per week. And no one complains.

Indeed, much of the bodily capital they develop results in a deep pride about their work. Their dedication and seriousness very seldom result in economic capital, but they retain a desire for the social capital—both locally and internationally—that might come from wrestling well. Though they are masked and performances are not attributed to their public self, a good performance elevates the character, the group, and most broadly, Bolivian lucha libre as a whole.

When I began training, I was very conscious about being “tough” and continuing to train even when my body hurt and all I really wanted to do was eat a *salteña* and take a nap. I would stay for an extra hour after some had left because I wanted to prove that I was not “just” a gringa anthropologist participating to get a story. I felt it was important to prove my dedication. In fact, not only to “prove” it but to feel it, to *be* it. And on the few occasions when I felt like I had let the Super Catch luchadores down—either after a performance that did not go ideally or after several hours of attempting a *llave* and not being able to get it right—I was upset with myself, not because I couldn’t live up to my own expectations, but because I felt like I had disappointed my *compañeros*. But when I did get things right—when I learned a move quickly or after performances everyone agreed were almost perfect—I was proud because I had contributed positively to the group.

What started as a desperate attempt to prove myself as a capable luchadora became my investment in the group as an authentic example of *lucha libre* in Bolivia. As I discussed here, both my feelings of inadequacy and conversely authenticity were connected to my body. When my body “functioned,” I barely noticed it. When it did not naturally move the way I wished, whether in training, performances, or standing in the background in television promotions, I was aware of it as a fragmented entity. As Wacquant writes of boxing, “To say that pugilism is a body-centered universe is an understatement” (1995:66). A boxer or wrestler “is” their body (Oates 1987:5). And because wrestlers are portraying characters and telling stories through their bodies, this is even more true. It is the body that can either betray or grant authenticity to the wrestler.

## CHAPTER 3

### PAYASAS Y ÁGILES: IMAGINED COSMOPOLITANISM AND THE STRUGGLE FOR INTERNATIONAL LEGITIMACY

During my training with Super Catch, it was important to me to prove myself to the luchadores. I didn't want them to think of me as "just an anthropologist" who was only training because I was writing about them. I wanted them to see that I was dedicated to training and I hoped that as I learned more and more *claves* they might even be impressed with my ability. This was partially a point of self-pride, but also was greatly influenced by the conversation Edgar and I had in July of 2011, when he first mentioned that he hoped I would train with Super Catch the following year. He suggested that I join the group after becoming frustrated while trying explain to me the difference between luchadores with ability and those that he referred to as "payasos" [clowns]. "Ellos hacen mucho show. No es lucha libre, es todo show. No tienen agilidad, no hacen claves bien. Solo show" [They make a lot of show. Its not lucha libre, its all show. They don't have agility, they don't do moves well. Only show]. "Pero toda la lucha libre es show, no? Es un espectáculo?" [But all of lucha libre is a show, right? A spectacle?] I protested. Eventually, he decided the only way for me to truly understand the difference between groups that relied mostly on humor and spectacle to attract audiences and those that concentrated more on agility and the skillful execution of *claves* was to train and perform with Super Catch.

When I began training, Edgar assured me over and over that I would be well trained. We would take our time and I would be prepared before I entered the ring, "no como las cholitas" [not like the cholitas]. During training, we spent most of our time developing basic skills and practicing *claves*. Basic skills included sommersaults and how to fall while slapping the mat with both hands. This made a louder noise than just a thud from the body, but as they explained to me,

it was fundamentally important because spreading the arms wide on the mat both distributed your weight, and protected the head and neck from hitting the mat. When I did it incorrectly, the weight would all concentrate in my upper back and my neck would feel a snap as I hit. Sometimes it almost knocked the air out of me. But when everything happened in sync—I put my arms out at the right time and my hands hit the mat at the same time as my body—my head stayed above the mat and force propelled me back up for another move.

The claves I learned involved a lot of twisting, flipping, and flying. These were the most fun for me. The feeling of jumping from the top rope of being flung in circles was exhilarating. But even watching my fellow luchadores do these moves was thrilling. Not all the luchadores in the group focused on these, but those that did—like Edgar, Julián, Roberto, and Miguel—were considered the best among us.

It was only in the training sessions leading up to events that I practiced castigos and holds. These moves usually started with some sort of arm lock, and one luchador would swing around and pull the other to the ground in a compromising position. Slaps and hits were also considered castigos. Edgar showed me how to slap his chest with a broad movement that would make a deep hollow sound, but not leave a red mark. These were the moves that required more performance, both from the aggressor and the receiver. Edgar instructed me that while being held to the ground I should kick or writhe. This made the struggle clean. It also helped in trying to escape a tight hold. If I was close enough to the rope, I would reach out for it, because touching the rope requires the referee to step in and break up the hold. This was an overtly visible way of demonstrating the action to the audience.

These moves felt the most awkward to me. I was never quite comfortable performing in such a theatrical way. Much like my preoccupation with my body as I entered the ring or stood

among the other luchadores on a television program, I always had to think too much about when, how, and how much to perform these aspects of the fight. When I asked the Super Catch luchadores for advice, several suggested I watch videos of WWE or Asistencia Asesoria Administracion (AAA), an internationally broadcast Mexican lucha libre group. Rather than taking a lot of time during training to focus on this part of lucha libre that was acted out, its performative elements were left as an afterthought.

Barthes writes that in wrestling, “all signs must be excessively clear, but must not let the intention of clarity be seen” (2000:20). These lessons in castigos and holds were important but for us, the struggle and strain were always real in part. If they were acted out and excessive, “this [was] going too far...as in the theater, one fails to put the part across as much by an excess of sincerity as by an excess of formalism” (Barthes 2000:20). The performance of pain, strain, and tensions rested on a fine balance between too much visibility and too little.

### Physical Humor in the Ring

This was clearly not the case with some other groups. In June of 2012, after training with Super Catch for six months, Edgar invited me to go to the Multifunctional with him to see a Titanes del Ring event. He was hoping to speak to Mr. Atlas there about putting on an event together, but also thought watching another group’s event might help me in my own development as a luchadora. Titanes del Ring was certainly the biggest show in the area, attracting several hundred audience members every week and Edgar thought we might both learn something about how the group was so successful at bringing in an audience.

On an unusually cloudy and gray Sunday afternoon, we met at Plaza San Francisco and took a minibus to La Ceja in El Alto. Tickets to Titanes del Ring events cost 15 Bs. (\$2) for local Bolivians, but are 50 Bs. (\$7) for foreigners. I was willing to pay the higher price, but Edgar

insisted we could find a way for me to get in. “Ven” [Come] he whispered as he pulled me out of line and behind a tree that grew in the pebbled clearing outside of the arena. He told me that we would tell the ticket takers that I was his wife, so I needed to pay the Bolivian price. This quickly resulted in an argument between Edgar and the ticket-taker, who insisted that I would have to prove myself with a marriage certificate or a Bolivian passport to enter at the local price. Edgar was frustrated and wanted to just leave, but I eventually convinced him it was fine for me to pay the 50 Bs. We finally entered the arena mid-way through the first match, and found seats on the cement bleachers along the left side.

As we watched the first match between Gran Mortis (the skeleton character who dances) and Mr. Atlas, he commented to me that I should take note of their style, and try to use what I learned to improve my own wrestling technique. But as subsequent matches unfolded Edgar started grumbling again about the lack of skill the luchadores displayed. At Titanes del Ring events, much of what happened in the ring highlighted the performative aspects of exhibition wrestling more than the athletic abilities of those wrestling. LIDER events were structured similarly, even though there were striking differences between the audiences of the two groups. Titanes del Ring and LIDER usually had six to eight matches per event with a referee officiating, and had two or three announcers providing commentary during the matches. Often the announcers led the spectators in chants such as “dale! dale!” [give it! give it!] or “maricón” [sissy]<sup>5</sup>. The matches usually lasted between ten and twenty minutes, and involved plenty of flips, headlocks, and throws to the ground. The luchadores occasionally jumped from the ropes, grappled outside of the ring, and banged opponents’ heads into walls, ring posts, or the plastic

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<sup>5</sup> “Maricón” very much has the connotation of “faggot,” and specifically the passive partner in a sexual relationship between two men (see Wright 2000:92). But as several audience members explained to me, maricón can also simply mean something along the lines of “sissy” or “wimp.” The word may not specifically be used as a homophobic slur, but certainly retains a reference to failure at hegemonic heterosexual masculinity.

chairs surrounding the ring. The matches ended when one wrestler or team of wrestlers pinned the other for the referee's count of three.

The first match almost always involved two men playing fantasy-like characters. In addition to the skeleton character Mr. Atlas wrestled against that day, these characters included stumbling werewolves, stoic mummies, ninjas, jail convicts in striped attire, clowns with whistles and balloons, and horror film characters such as Freddy Kruger, Jason, or Chucky. The characters that one would expect to find in a child's bad dream—like the *Nightmare on Elm Street* characters, mummies, and werewolves—were usually coded as *rudos*. They generally lacked agility and spent a great deal of their time chasing children through the audience. They used brute force, adding to their stoicism. Characters like the ninja and skeleton that often erupted into dance were coded as *técnicos*, and engaged with the audience more, striking poses for pictures, or giving high fives to children. These characters also tended to have a higher level of acrobatic wrestling ability, but sometimes scary characters with their brute force won anyway. These matches usually resonated most closely with the youngest audience members, though it was not unusual to see a mother or father running away from a werewolf or mummy along with their children.

After this initial “fantasy” match, usually two male *luchadores* would wrestle. Often these were inexperienced *luchadores* whose position near the beginning of the program served to warm up the audience. Both would be dressed in some sort of spandex or jersey costume, and they would wrestle in a technical style. These matches lacked most of the “theatrical” aspects of the other matches, and involved more acrobatic moves such as the *mariposa*, *tijeras*, and *místicos*. These moves involved jumping, flipping, and twisting all at once. They were difficult to execute correctly, and looked impressive when done well.



And then, finally, came the cholitas luchadoras. These matches sometimes included two luchadoras wrestling against each other, and other times, featured one técnica luchadora against a rudo male luchador. After the initial match featuring luchadoras, the bouts usually alternated between two experienced luchadores and more luchadora matches. In these events, like in Mexican and US exhibition wrestling, each match built up to the next, better-executed, more exciting bout, with the final match serving as the highlight of the evening. Almost always, the final match that garnered the most attention featured one or two cholitas luchadoras.

Before their matches, the luchadora(s) entered the event space to traditional Cumbia music, spinning and dancing in a style reminiscent of the folkloric dances featured in Carnaval and local festival parades. They clapped their hands to the beat, and sometimes danced with the crowd or kissed spectators' cheeks. When there were two luchadoras sometimes they would both enter this way, presenting themselves as técnicas, and other times one was marked as a ruda. Sometimes a ruda would begin dancing into the audience just as the técnica had, but then would start to insult the spectators or throw water on the front row. When a man was involved in a match with a cholita luchadora, he was almost always a rudo, unless wrestling against a luchadora known for being a ruda (such as Jennifer dos Caras).

The matches featuring cholitas luchadoras were often the most theatrical as well. Though the wrestlers used the same basic moves and the rules remained the same, the highlights of these matches were not incredible twisting jumps from the top rope as in some técnico matches, but the humor that the women incorporated. Some of this humor directly referenced their chola characters. Most notably, they often played off of the widely-known joke that a stench emanates from below the chola's pollera (Wesimantel 2001:260), by lifting their skirt, either toward the referee or their opponent. The recipient of this "move" would then clutch his throat, stumble

backwards and feign asphyxiation [Figures 1 and 2: Claudina and Fiera, Titanes del Ring 2011].

In matches with two women, the luchadoras also made prominent use of their braids, with much hair pulling, and using the braids to launch each other into the ropes.



Figure 10. Fiera v. Claudina, 17 April, 2011



Figure 11. Fiera v. Claudina, 17 April 2011

The luchadoras also incorporated moves that did not specifically relate to their chola characters, but emphasized the corporeal differences between men and women. Most commonly, the luchadoras kicked their male opponents or the referee between the legs. They also often grabbed their opponent's groin to pull him forward or push him into the corner of the ropes. [Figure 3: Antonia grabs the groin of the referee, Titanes del Ring 2009]. In the kicking version of this strategy, often three people were involved—sometimes including the referee. A man/woman team would have the third person, usually a luchadora, in a hold in which her head was trapped between the knees of the man as he stood in the corner. The luchadora who was teamed with the man would then back up in preparation to assault the woman who was trapped.



But inevitably, at the last moment, the woman would break free, and move so that the assault was delivered directly to the man's groin. He would then writhe on the floor while the two women continued to grapple.



Figure 12. Antonia and the Referee, 9 August 2009

Undergarments were also prominently featured in these matches. As physics dictated, when the women flipped or were pinned to the mat with their legs aloft, their skirts succumbed to the laws of gravity and their underwear were exposed. While women wearing skirts in other sports such as tennis, cheerleading, or field hockey have uniforms that include somewhat modest bloomers that hide the underwear, the luchadoras often wore undergarments that attracted attention. They were brightly colored or animal printed, as if they were meant to be seen [Figure

14: Sexy Viper and Jennifer pin Antonia with her undergarments exposed, Titanes del Ring 2009]. But perhaps more surprisingly, sometimes the men's underwear was exposed as well. On a number of occasions, I saw the luchadoras pull down their opponents' pants, usually revealing equally flashy undergarments. Often, the humor was not only that the men had their underwear exposed, but they also fumbled excessively before effectively re-dressing themselves [Figure 5: Sexy Viper struggles to pull his pants back up, Titanes del Ring 2009]. With their pants around their ankles, they often tripped sending their barely-clad (sometimes only in a G-string) buttocks into the air or audience members' faces.

These two stunts were usually audience favorites, with laughter erupting from the crowd. These were the moments when I could see the audience come alive: yelling, pointing things out to their friends and families, throwing popcorn, or shaking sticks (one middle aged woman arrived every week with a yellow plastic baseball bat to shake at the referees). By contrast, during the more acrobatic matches, audience members sat transfixed, watching the fast flips, turns, and jumps. They were clearly enthralled, but these matches were impressive rather than fun.



Figure 13. Sexy Viper and Jennifer Pin Antonia With Her Undergarments Exposed, 19 July 2009



Figure 14. Sexy Viper Struggles to Pull Up His Pants, 19 July 2009



As I sat and watched matches with Edgar that day, I realized that as he had predicted, my own training allowed me to see nuance in the lucha libre matches. Spending months learning new claves had changed my perspective and I could finally understand the distinction he made between wrestling matches that were “muy show” and those that he considered more athletically legitimate. Even though both incorporated modes of performance, those that he equated with clowning focused on theatricality, not abiding by Barthes’s caution that the gestures can go “too far.” In each of the Titanes del Ring matches, very little time was spent on acrobatic moves. Most of the performances focused on interactions with the audience, and the humor of kicks to the groin, chairs to the face, and even a clown crying when his opponent popped the balloons he had carried into the ring.

After the event, as we rode the minibus down the steep mountain from El Alto back to the center of the city, Edgar asked me what I thought of the matches. Without giving me a chance to answer, he asked, “Son malas, no?” [They’re bad, aren’t they?]. And I agreed. They were funny. There were plenty of humorous yells at the audience, bodily comedy, and goofy antics, but the actual wrestling wasn’t convincing. The moves weren’t done with skill. It seemed to me that even though my own matches with Super Catch were shorter, they featured far more wrestling moves in total. “Es más show y menos lucha,” [It’s more show and less wrestling] I responded. “Falta mucha técnica,” [It lacks a lot of technical skill] continued Edgar.

### The Stakes of Lucha Libre

What seemed most frustrating to Edgar during our conversation in the minibus after the event was the disjuncture between what he perceived as the low level of wrestling talent in Titanes del Ring and the large audience at the show. As we watched that Sunday night, he and I guessed there were around 500 people in attendance, in contrast to the mere 60 we were able to

attract at the most recent Super Catch event in his own neighborhood of Villa Copacabana. In addition to the local audience members, there were around 200 tourists at the Titanes del Ring event, all of whom pay 50 Bs. per person. The only foreigners at our events had been my friends and family who had come to visit me from the United States. I could sense his disappointment in realizing that for both the Bolivian and foreign audiences, the actual wrestling did not seem to matter.

My interviews with audience members at Titanes del Ring and LIDER events confirmed Edgar's fears. One local man in his thirties suggested these luchadores' ability to wrestle while keeping the audience entertained was why they were so popular. "Porque la agresividad, el mal drama, la comedia son los artes muy antiguos y que siempre hemos sabido apreciar" [Because the aggressiveness, the evil drama, the comedy are very old arts and we have always known how to appreciate them]. A woman in her late twenties concurred saying she supported them "porque son realmente las mejores que hacen las cosas. Trabajan bien con el público, tienen experiencia, cosas así." [because they are really the best that do these things. They work well with the audience, they have experience, things like that]. Finally a teenage girl told me "tienen una chispa, esa gracia pa divertir a las personas. Su pinta me encanta!" [They have a spark, a grace that amuses people. They make me love it!].

Each of these fans pointed to the luchadores' exaggerated performances and use of humor. Their ability to play to the audience especially came through in all three comments. "We have always known how to appreciate them," "They work well with the audience," and "They have a spark, a grace that amuses people," clearly illustrate the ability of the luchadoras to use humor to draw in the audience. None of the audience members mentioned their agility or impressive moves. Rather, they noted the non-athletic aspects of the performance.



“La lucha no es como antes cuando empezó mi papá” [Wrestling isn’t like it used to be when my dad started] Edgar complained at a meeting of Super Catch wrestlers the next week. Jorge added, “ahora está llena de payasos” [Now its full of clowns]. “Pero los payasos ganan el dinero!” [But the clowns make the money!] Edgar continued. He did not mean to indicate that Super Catch should change their approach. Rather he was frustrated that the group he perceived as performing at such a low level could garner large audiences. Edgar and most other Super Catch luchadores were adamant about maintaining high levels of lucha libre skill, despite the fact that it was not what attracted audiences. Though it frustrated them, their priority was improving skill. They hoped that through continued publicity, they would eventually be able to garner audiences that appreciated the kind of lucha libre they performed.

Though Edgar had specifically pointed out that “the clowns make the money,” we all knew that no one was really making enough money to sustain a career. Neither men nor women in the industry were paid well. Pay per event usually ranged between 20 and 100 Bolivianos (\$3 and \$14 USD)—enough to supplement family income, but not nearly enough to entirely support even a single person. The men I knew had jobs as auto or plane mechanics, doctors, or were studying subjects like international business. I knew luchadoras who were nurses, custodians, full-time mothers, and philosophy students. Of course, they all knew when they began training that lucha libre was not a paying career. Most luchadores told me they did not begin wrestling for the money, but because they enjoyed the spotlight, they liked the physical activity, and it was fun. They took great pride in performing well, but none presumed that wrestling would be their livelihood.

Wrestling in Bolivia is not big business. Though crowds will fill the Multifuncional in El Alto to its capacity of 500 people, this is hardly impressive in a metropolitan area of almost 2

million. Though in working class areas like El Alto, Villa Victoria, and Villa Copacabana there were devoted lucha libre fans, events were never staged in middle class or wealthy neighborhoods because there were no strong fan bases in those areas. The ways many middle class Paceños talked about wrestling suggested they saw it as a classed “genre of excess.” As Linda Williams explains of film genres, those that have a particularly low cultural status—horror, pornography, and melodrama—are ones in which “the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen” (1991:4). These films, rather than appealing to elite classes as “high art”, are seen to be for the less educated, less “cultured” masses. And indeed, lucha libre combines aspects of all three of these film types. The enacted violence of the ring reflects the gratuitous violence of horror films. The intimate contact of bodies, and sometimes explicit sexually charged scenarios, can be read as pornographic (see Messner, et. al 2003, Rahilly 2005). And several scholars have pointed to the melodramatic nature of the extreme good and evil portrayed in exhibition wrestling (Jenkins 2007, Levi 2008).

When I asked Kid Simonini why lucha libre was popular in La Paz, he instead told me why many people to *not* appreciate it. To him, because luchadores were primarily from the popular classes, the elite classes were uninterested.

Bueno, la lucha libre le gusta a la gente popular. No le gusta así a la gente....tanta burguesa. Porque? Eso tiene una razon...La gente piensan que [la lucha libre] no está bien formada. Una persona burguesa va a buenos colegios, se desarrollan hasta el máximo que pueden...Y de nosotros, la mayoría, 95% de los luchadores no tenemos este estilo de vida. Entiende? Y entonces, para el burgués si tú tienes un hijo, si va a ser luchador no va a tener buenas opciones. [Los luchadores] son mala gente para ellos.

Well, the popular classes like lucha libre. The people...the bourgeois don't like it so much. Why? This has a reason. They think that it's not cultured. It's not well educated. And the people, a bourgeois person does well in several schools, goes as far as they can go...And of us, the majority, 95% of luchadores, we don't have this style of life, you

understand? And then the bourgeois, if you have a child that you pay for well and that becomes a luchador, they won't have good options. Wrestlers are bad people for them.

Kid Simonini suggested that "bourgeois" people thought lucha libre was uncultured. Because luchadores were seen as examples of low class people, those from elite classes looked down on the events.

Specifically, some middle class Paceños told me they weren't interested in lucha libre because of its violent nature. A middle aged man named Álvaro told me one night over beers in a nice Sopocachi bar near his apartment that he never liked lucha libre because "*ooooodio la violencia!*" [I haaaate violence]. He called it silly and offensive before repeating his hate for violence. Others were more flippant in dismissing it as violent with statements like "Eh, no me gusta cosas con violencia" [Oh, I don't like things with violence] or "No entiendo por que la gente le gusta cosas asi" [I don't understand why people like such things].

Based on informal conversations I had with numerous Paceños and Alteños of all social classes, the overwhelming reaction to lucha libre seemed to be dismissal. Yet, the Super Catch luchadores were welcomed on five different television stations to promote our matches more than 15 times in 2012. These were stations that often catered to professional Paceños that watched in the mornings as they prepared for work in banks, universities, and international organizations. I wondered, if the broad audiences of these channels were so dismissive, why would luchadores be such popular guests on morning and late-night talk shows? Our five appearances on La Revista talk show on Unitel in March and April offered some insight. Though the show has four hosts, we were always interviewed by Ramiro Serrano, the comic of the group. Serrano is known for dressing up as characters on the show, from a bodybuilder known as "Tony Melao," to an indigenous man, complete with alpaca hat and poncho. When we appeared on the show he wore his Tony Melao tshirt (which said "Soy No. 1" on the back) with a black curly wig

and silver luchador mask [figures 10 and 11]. He was usually incorporated into the demonstrations as well. The segment always featured a brawl between wrestlers, and often the Super Catch luchadores would gang up on Tony, fling around the sound stage, push him to the floor and mock kick him. He acted as the clown figure in these situations, with flailing arms, and making exaggerated faces for the camera. By contrast, the Super Catch luchadores appeared more serious. Our costumes were obviously better constructed. Our moves were more practiced and clearly more effective in contrast to Tony's. But much like some male luchadores' worries that the humor used by Titanes del Ring turned the whole phenomenon into clowning, Tony's clownish acting gave an air of farce to the wrestling that happened on television.

No luchadores ever commented on this except to roll their eyes occasionally when Tony was mentioned in the backstage area. Nor did I have a chance to ask Tony or the program producers what their intentions were with the way they presented lucha libre. Though TV interviewers always treated all the luchadores with respect, their over-acted treatment of the segments seemed to stem not only from their television personalities, but from a deeper sense of irony they were communicating to viewers.

This facetious enthusiasm for lucha libre was also evident among middle class Paceños who were my own age. Many of my friends were puzzled but amused by my interest and involvement in lucha libre. For them it was something of a joke that carried classed inflection. Like a monster truck rally or square dance might be viewed by urban elites in the United States, lucha libre is not disparaged outright, but lies squarely within the bounds of that which can be enjoyed, but not appreciated on an artistic or serious level.



Figure 15. Super Catch Luchadores on La Revista Morning Show on Unitel (Channel 2). On The Left, Ramiro Serrano in His Tony Melao Costume Speaks with His Co-host Gonzalo Gorriti During a Commercial Break, While Super Catch Luchadores Look On. From Left to Right: Super Cuate, Big Boy, Desertor, Black Spyder, Lady Blade, Tony Montana, Gran Mortis, and Big Man.

Like North American young people, young Paceños sometimes had ironic appreciation for degraded cultural symbols like lucha libre. The popular Paceño band, Surfin' Wagner combined a lucha libre aesthetic with surf rock music. The band's name is derived from a famous Mexican luchador, Dr. Wagner, otherwise known as Manuel González Rivera. He began wrestling in the 1960s as a rudo, but by the early 1980s—when the members of Surfin Wagner and my friends were young children—he had become a tecnico. In 1985 he lost a match in a well-publicized event and essentially retired.



Figure 16. La Revista Hosts Pose with Super Catch Luchadores. From Left to Right: Gonzalo Gorriti, Black Spyder, Ramiro Serrano, Chuky, Desertor, Predator, Rayden, Lady Blade and El Momia.

The band members use lucha libre inspired names (Pedro Wagner, Médiko Loko—a misspelling of famous Mexican luchador Médico Loco, Roy Fuckler—after a Japanese anime character later used in Mexican wrestling, El Momia, and Comando—both popular characters in Bolivian wrestling), and wear lucha libre head-masks along with their Hawaiian print shirts. They describe their music as “el Garage, el punk y principalmente el Surf, siempre con un toque de sátira e ironía” [garage rock, punk, and principally surf, always with a touch of satire and irony]. The “biography” of the band on their website suggests that the band members are legitimate luchadores (again with irony), and they point out the incongruity of a surf band in a



country without access to the sea. Their use of the lucha libre aesthetic was thus squarely enmeshed in a range of ironic references meant to evoke laughter.

The performances of Tony Melo and Surfin' Wagner exemplified how many young middle class and elite Paceños saw lucha libre as a light-hearted representation of Latin American culture. It was appreciated in certain senses, but those who primarily participated in these incarnations—either as performers or audience members—did not contribute to luchadores' social or economic capital. Rather than these representations contributing to a sense of international legitimacy for the luchadores, they positioned lucha libre as ironic and worthy of mockery. And perhaps more immediately important to the luchadores, most of the people making and enjoying ironic representations of lucha libre did not attend wrestling events, and thus did not contribute to revenue for the lucha libre groups.

This revenue was ultimately important in order for groups to continue functioning. Renting a venue like the Coloseo de Villa Victoria or Multifuncional cost just under 1,000 Bolivianos. To rent the ring from Don Mauricio and transport all of its parts cost several hundred Bolivianos more. And with tickets selling for 15 Bolivianos, they needed an audience of several hundred just to break even. After each Super Catch show, all the group members would engage in a tense discussion about how we would divide the profits. Usually Edgar led a call to save some of the revenue to use for renting a venue and the ring for the next show, while others would argue that all the money should be split evenly between everyone who performed. Usually, in the end, some money was kept for the next event, and each luchador received about 40 Bolivianos.

Additionally, luchadores paid for their own costumes. Most wrestlers had at least two characters with two separate trajes. My own, which was among the most simple, cost about 500 Bs. (\$70) in all. Additionally wrestling boots, capes, and masks added to the total. Other costs

arose on occasions as well. Before our third show of the season in Villa Armonía, Edgar and Jorge collected money to buy a *tela* [skirt] for the ring. Though it was voluntary, all of the wrestlers gave between 30 and 60 Bs. to the cause. After all the expenses, luchadores often ended up spending more to participate than they received as compensation.

Especially when money was tight, luchadores often spoke of what Roberto called the “golden age” of lucha libre in Bolivia, when it appeared on television. They talked about the late 1990s as a time when several prominent luchadores that were highly skilled, fans were abundant, and pay was good. Edgar, his father, and Victor had been negotiating with TV Palenque to begin a weekly televised wrestling show under the name Tigres del Ring [Tigers of the Ring], but negotiations moved slowly. They hoped returning to television would bring the high profit margins of the 1990s. They also hoped it would increase visibility for highly skilled wrestlers and return them to a position of international respect that had been lost since the late 1990s. Many Super Catch luchadores felt that they were no longer respected because of the focus on humor that had dominated lucha libre in Bolivia since the early 2000s.

### Evaluation of Lucha Libre Styles

The Super Catch luchadores placed this emphasis on humor in contrast to *agilidad* [agility], which they felt should be the foundation of wrestling. This was first impressed upon me in training when I was told that I should do back bends on my bed every morning and stretch every night before going to bed. “Para mejorar tu agilidad” [To improve your agility] Edgar and Roberto encouraged.

But the value placed on agility was also evident in other ways. Super Catch publicity (both in print, and online) always included the subheading “Destreza, agilidad, destrucción, sangre y venganza solo en Súper Catch!!!!” [Dexterity, agility, destruction, blood and vengeance



only in Super Catch!!!!]. The highlighting of dexterity and agility as the first two descriptors clearly marked them as important ways of characterizing the group. Not only were these qualities something the luchadores strove for in training, but they also summed up the way that they hoped audiences would think of them.

Another important way many luchadores demonstrated the value placed on agility was in their descriptions of their favorite wrestlers. When I asked wrestlers from Super Catch and LIDER which Bolivian luchadores they admired most, wanted to emulate, and would like to wrestle with, they invariably mentioned those who were known for their agility rather than in-ring personalities. They often cited their “*ídolos*” [idols] as Sombra Jr. and Vampiro Uno (sons of Sombra Vengadora), Jaider Lee (son of Medico Loco), and Aquaman. When I asked why, the luchadores almost always referenced their *agilidad*, *destreza*, *acrobática* [acrobatics], and *estilo* [style]. Roberto even said that Jaider Lee and Aquaman were the reason he first wanted to begin wrestling. When I asked why he was a *técnico* instead of a *rudo* he told me, “*Sí, claro, podría ser rudo. Ya que todos tenemos el bien y el mal dentro de nosotros y cualquier momento podría cambiar de estilo. Pero soy técnico para mostrar la velocidad y agilidad que estoy aprendiendo*” [Yes, sure, I could be a *rudo*. All of us have a good and a bad side and I could change from one to the other at any time. But I am a *técnico* to demonstrate the velocity and agility that I am developing]. Not all of these luchadores necessarily emulated their “*ídolos*” acrobatic style with flying flips and complex *claves*. However, almost all recognized them as the purveyors of the style of *lucha libre* that was collectively valued by those who saw the “*clowning*” of *Titanes del Ring* as an embarrassment.

The Super Catch luchadores placed emphasis on agility specifically because they thought of it as a skill that was necessary for international legitimacy in wrestling. In particular, Mexican

lucha libre is known for its acrobatic content, and Bolivians saw this as the style that would be most respected. When I asked Roberto what style he thought was the best, he quickly what style he values most, Roberto quickly replied with “estilo Mexicano” [Mexican style]. After a bit more thought he added “aunque ahora intento fusionarlo con el estilo Americano y asi lograr un nuevo estilo” [although now I am trying to combine it with American style and attain a new style].

Many of the Bolivian luchadores with whom I spoke aspired to compete at the level of Mexican, Japanese, and United States wrestling. They worried that local and foreign audiences thought of them as a “B-grade incarnation” of the sport, as it was described in travel blogs like “Round the Middle” (2012). When Luis Cabelo, a famous Venezuelan photographer, arrived in Bolivia to capture lucha libre on film in 2011, he mentioned to me some things about the events that surprised him. After years of watching Mexican lucha libre he noted that the level of improvisation was lacking and the events were poorly organized with little advertising and a long belated start. These criticisms were not new to the Bolivian luchadores and they often told me that they hoped their form of lucha libre would one day be positioned to compete with international tours and tv programs like WWE in the U.S. and AAA in Mexico. But they knew they had a long way to go.

Ninja Boliviano, a LIDER member who trained at a lucha libre school in Mexico City for over a year before returning to La Paz criticized Bolivian lucha libre, saying “La lucha en Bolivia, no está al nivel que tiene en México que es la cuna del catch y la lucha libre. No todos los luchadores de aquí están preparados física y técnicamente. Porque digo esto? Hay jóvenes hoy en día que entrenando dos o tres meses quieren subir al cuadrilátero queriendo demostrar lo que es la lucha libre.” [Wrestling in Bolivia is not on the level that they have in Mexico, which is the cradle of catch and wrestling. Not all the wrestlers are prepared physically and

technically. Why do I say this? There are young wrestlers today who train two or three months and want to go into the ring hoping to demonstrate what lucha libre is.].

The sentiments espoused by Ninja Boliviano were echoed by Apokalipsis, a Peruvian wrestler. Carlos, the publicist and blogger for Titanes del Ring published an interview he conducted with Apokalipsis on his blog on 29 September 2011. As part of the interview, he specifically asked what the “problemática” [problematics] of Bolivian lucha libre were.

Apokalipsis responded

Bueno este es un problema sencillo de resolver y a la vez difícil ya que viene desde hace muchísimos años, creo que se tiene que cambiar la forma de pensar; ser más abiertos y sobre todo preparar a nuevos valores, pero no solo física ni técnicamente si no también en valores, tienen que aprender a respetar este deporte... Por ejemplo ¿cómo es posible que no haya nuevas figuras desde la época de Jaider Lee, Sombra Vengadora, Karateca, Vampiro, Aquaman, Satánico Histeria, etc?. Todos los que he nombrado son muy buenos Luchadores pero se han puesto a pensar ¿qué pasara cuando ellos ya no estén?, hay que preocuparse en hacer crecer el universo de Luchadores de nivel, solo así saldrán adelante.

Well, this is a problem that is simple to resolve and at the same time difficult as it has come from many years ago. And I think you have to change the form of thinking; to be more open and above everything prepare the next generation, but not only physically or technically. We also need to change their values, they have to learn to respect this sport... For example, how is it possible that there are no new figures since the era of Jaider Lee, Sombra Vengadora, Karateca, Vampiro [Uno], Aquaman, Satánico Histeria, etc? All of those I named are very good luchadores, but they make you wonder what will happen when they are no longer here. We need to worry about bringing up the pool of luchadores of a high level. Only then they will move forward.

Apokalipsis touched on two different points the luchadores found important. First, he stressed a need for respect for the sport. Unlike the young wrestlers who Ninja Boliviano rebuked for only training a few months, Apokalipsis suggested that truly respecting the sport required both physical training and a change in values. Both wrestlers implicitly placed value on serious wrestling that was based on skill, in contrast to staging performances that relied on gimmicks and gags. Apokalipsis highlighted this preference further when listing Jaider Lee, Sombra Vengadora, Vampiro Uno, Aquaman, and others who were known for being agile

luchadores. Apokalipsis asked “What will happen when they are no longer here?” suggesting that Bolivian lucha libre was quickly losing its true luchadores, and they were being replaced by wrestlers that used humorous pranks in the ring to compensate for their low level of technical skill.

Wrestlers and fans also complained about those that demonstrated a lack of respect for lucha libre by copying characters. “Plagiarism” and “cloning” characters were common themes that surfaced in my interviews with both luchadores and spectators, and reflect disappointment that Bolivia’s contributions to international wrestling were neither creative nor original.

Luchadores from Super Catch, LIDER, and Grupo Lucha Libre Profesional (GLLP) [Professional Wrestling Group] in Santa Cruz all cited concern with a lack of creativity in Bolivian lucha libre. Even the international Spanish language lucha libre website called Superluchas published a guest blog in May 2011 alleging that Bolivian fans were tired of all the wrestling companies in Bolivia because they lacked personality and plagiarized names, masks, and teams.

Carlos, the publicist and website manager for LIDER explained why this impacted the level of wrestling in Bolivia

En mi opinión, la lucha libre boliviana bajó en todos los niveles y no tiene una personalidad, pues está ocurriendo plagio de nombres, máscaras y equipos—Ephesto, Dr. Wagner, etc. por ejemplo. Tomados no sólo de la cuna de la Lucha Libre como es México, si no también ahora de la WWE... Los aficionados Bolivianos estamos cansados que las empresas de lucha libre acá en Bolivia, quedamos mal ante los ojos del mundo.

In my opinion, Bolivian wrestling is low in all levels and lacks any personality in it. Plagiarism is occurring in names, masks, and teams—Ephesto, Dr. Wagner, etc. for example. We take not only from the cradle of lucha libre which is Mexico, but also now from the WWE... We Bolivian aficionados are tired of wrestling companies here in Bolivia, we look very bad in the eyes of the world.

Some lucha libre groups try to rectify this problematic stereotype of Bolivian wrestling by being outspoken about their groups' creativity. Anarkista from GLLP proudly proclaimed to me, "En mi empresa tenemos personajes totalmente propios, auténticos y originales...obviamente influidos por otras figuras, pero auténticos" [In my company we have characters that are totally their own, authentic, and original...obviously influenced by other figures, but authentic].

Similarly, Super Catch created a contract-like document prohibiting any plagiarism among the luchadores of the group. One afternoon following a training session in Parque de los Monos, we walked back to the Mercado Camacho for a meeting. With a 2 liter bottle of Coca-cola at the center of the table, Victor took everyone's input and wrote out

Después de muchas reuniones y analizando la realidad de la lucha libre Boliviana, viendo la problemática de los plagios y otros aspectos que sólo hicieron quedar mal a la lucha libre de Bolivia, una nueva empresa de lucha libre, Super Catch, decidió trabajar solamente con gente joven y las principales reglas de esta empresa son que está prohibido copiar o plagiar equipos de lucha, seudónimos o nombres de luchadores extranjeros.

After many meetings and analyzing the state of Bolivian wrestling, considering the problem of plagiarism and other aspects that only keep Bolivian wrestling in a poor state. A new wrestling company, Super Catch, has decided to work only with young people and the principal rules of this group are that it is prohibited to copy or plagiarize wrestling costumes, pseudonyms, or names of foreign wrestlers.

As I walked back towards San Pedro and Plaza San Francisco with Edgar, Roberto, and Jorge after the meeting, I asked them why they paid so much attention to plagiarism. They all offered similar explanations that it ruined the reputation of all the different groups in Bolivia. As we parted ways at Calle Loayza, Edgar finished by saying, "Lo único que quiero es que este deporte siga sin fraudes y algún día cambiar totalmente y que no haya impostores que los sigan engañando a los amigos de otras ciudades o países" [The only thing I want is for this sport to continue without fraud and some day change totally so that there are no impostors that continue deceiving friends from other cities or countries].

This strong statement closely aligned with something he told me the first time I interviewed him in June 2011. As I was about to turn off my recorder, he asked me which luchadores I had interviewed recently. I tried to evade the question, only mentioning the luchadora who had originally put me in contact with him and added “y algunas otras cholitas luchadoras” [and a few other cholitas luchadoras]. He scowled and told me I was talking to people “que no aman la lucha libre” [that don’t love lucha libre]. When I pressed him about why he said that they don’t love lucha libre he told me they “no respetan el deporte y ponen la lucha libre en verguenza” [don’t respect the sport and bring shame to lucha libre]. As he elaborated, he explained that because some wrestlers didn’t respect the sport and were willing to participate in any event just to gain money, lucha libre appears amateur to foreigners. “Hacen que parezca que a Bolivia le falta mucho,” [They make it seem like Bolivia lacks a lot] he finished.

#### “Bolivia le Falta Mucho”

These fears that foreigners viewed Bolivian lucha libre as inferior reflected the ways many of my friends talked about Bolivia in general. Many expressed disappointment and said that living in Bolivia curtailed educational and work opportunities that they could find outside of the country. Some hoped to travel extensively or leave Bolivia permanently and cited Bolivia’s socio-economic climate as their reasoning. The country of Bolivia, nestled high in the Andes near the center of South America is considered to be one of the poorest and least developed countries in the hemisphere (CIA Factbook). Bolivia’s terrain, especially in the altiplano makes travel difficult, and after losing its coastal region to a Chilean military pursuit in 1879 it is now begrudgingly land-locked. This affects Bolivian industries’ ability to export, subjects imports to other countries’ taxes and regulations, and reportedly requires Bolivia to pay Chile or Brazil for access to fiber optic cables, driving internet prices up and speed down.

The 2001 National Census placed poverty rates at 59 percent and extreme poverty at 24.4%. And as the 2011 UNICEF report on poverty in Bolivia suggests, “With almost no productive investment, diminishing internal demand, lack of confidence, uncertainty, increasing lack of prestige of political parties and lack of credibility of the political system, conditions do not exist for economic reactivation in the short term.”

These conditions have existed for many of my friends’ whole lives. In 1980, before many of these young Paceños were born, a junta of armed forces commanders overthrew presidential incumbent Lidia Gueiler Tejada, in order to keep recently elected Hernando Siles from taking the office. The junta was in power until 1982, with General Luis García Meza Tejada, and later Celso Torellio acting as figureheads. During this time, political parties were outlawed, opposition leaders were exiled, unions were repressed, and the press was stifled. García Meza’s security forces killed an estimated 1,000 people during his “Pinochet-style dictatorship” (Vázquez Montalbán 1984) and Torellio was accused of torturing members of the opposition. In July 1982 the junta installed Guido Vildoso as president with the specific mandate to return the country to democracy (Klein 2003:239).

With the return to democracy, Siles returned from exile to take the presidency, only to face a period of hyperinflation that was the fourth largest ever recorded in the world (Klein 2003:241). When Victor Paz Estenssoro took office in 1985, he and Minister of Planning Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada implemented Jeffrey Sachs’s New Economic Policy (NEP), which was then mandated by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the United States Government.

Sachs writes that the NEP “went beyond macroeconomic stabilization to include fiscal reform, trade liberalization, internal price decontrol, and the decentralization or privatization of public enterprises” (Sachs 1987:281). The post-reform government was designed to ensure a

stable social and political environment for private firms (Kohl 2002:454-455). These economic measures were widely declared successful by policy makers and international sponsors (Healy and Paulson 2000:10). They stabilized the economy, ended the hyperinflation, established a single flexible exchange rate, and removed Bolivian imposed restrictions on imports and exports. According to its supporters, NEP “freed” the market from barriers to growth (Green 1995).

Yet, the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) led to increasing social and economic inequalities and had a negative impact on most Bolivians’ lives. When the government privatized unprofitable state companies, and closed large inefficient tin mines, they fired over thirty thousand workers and miners (Gill 1997). The informal economy grew, but working conditions deteriorated, resulting in precarious job security, reduced social benefits, and increasing fragmentation and feminization of the workforce (Loayza Castro 1997). In Lagos's (1997) analysis, the much heralded capitalization of state enterprises, whose proclaimed purpose was the redistribution of wealth to benefit all Bolivians, in fact benefited multinational corporations, leaving little or no money in the hands of the majority of the population.

In the midst of these reforms, Victor Paz Estenssoro was succeeded by Jaime Paz Zamora, who was well liked, but his administration was marred when his chief aid, Oscar Eid was jailed for drug trafficking (EFE 1994). When Paz Zamora left office in 1993, Sánchez de Lozada was elected President and initiated a series of constitutional, social, economic and political reforms that recognized indigenous rights, gave sovereignty to municipal governments, and instituted social welfare programs.

Hugo Banzer, a Bolivian dictator from the 1970s, succeeded Sánchez de Lozada to become the first former dictator in Latin America’s recent history to transition successfully to democratic politics in 1997. His presidency was remembered for the “Water War of 2000” in



which the water works in Cochabamba, the country's third largest city, were privatized. The associated rate increases fomented massive protests, and clashes between police and demonstrators resulted in excessive violence. Banzer declared a "state of siege" and officials of the companies that had purchased the rights to water fled when they were told the government could not guarantee their safety. The Banzer government then declared that their abandonment nullified the contracts and settled with the protestors (Olivera and Lewis 2004) .

After Banzer was succeeded by his vice president Jorge Quiroga, Sánchez de Lozada served again. During this second term, the economy plunged again and a group of union leaders representing cocaleros (coca farmers), urban workers, miners, and indigenous farmers joined together under the leadership of Evo Morales to found the "Estado Mayor del Pueblo" [People's High Command] in January 2003. They led a new wave of heightened protests by blocking main roads to the major cities of Bolivia. Over the course of the year, protests and demands became more focused with blockades, sieges of La Paz, and riots. When blockades kept vital supplies out of La Paz in the final months of 2003, Sánchez de Lozada deployed troops to combat the protestors, resulting in at least 59 civilian deaths, in what is now remembered as Octubre Rojo [Red October].

On 17 October, 2003, Sánchez de Lozada resigned and immediately left to the United States where he still resides, unwilling to return to Bolivia to face charges of human rights violations. Carlos Mesa succeeded him for one and a half years but himself resigned in 2005 after weeks of civil unrest led by Evo Morales. He was succeeded by judiciary head, Eduardo Rodríguez, on 10 June. Rodríguez was inaugurated with the constitutional mandate to call elections within one year's time. Those elections resulted in the election of Evo Morales as President.

Because of these political upheavals, many of my friends experienced their country as one that lacked political and economic stability. By contrast, the era of Evo Morales was more stable than previous administrations but was not without its problems. Morales, who openly disparaged “neoliberalism,” reinstated some social services, and nationalized many resources, but this was a slow process. These reforms were often fraught with resistance from elite Bolivians who benefited from neoliberal measures, as well as the international companies that stood to lose wide profit margins with the nationalization of industries. Morales’s self-described Marxist vice president, Álvaro García Linera, suggested that it was not realistic to think that change could come immediately. Instead, he impressed that it would take decades of building the class-consciousness and cohesion necessary for systemic change to a less capitalist economic structure in the country (Farthing 2009). Thus, the vulnerability of indigenous and working class Bolivians remained even as neoliberal policies were reversed.

While many of the country’s service industries were nationalized, many Bolivians complained this resulted in poor quality of service and slow improvements. Moreover, I heard many Bolivians joke that the country’s claim to fame was not picturesque landscapes or the assassination site of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, but rather the pervasive corruption that existed in both local and national government. Though Bolivia boasted a number of natural resources such as hydrocarbons, lithium, and silver, laws imposing high royalties discouraged foreign investment, keeping these industries small.

In essence, it was a country that both Bolivians and foreigners perceived as exuding shortcomings. Indeed, many of my Paceño friends complained that this recent history left them out of many global processes. Young people cited slow internet speeds (179<sup>th</sup> in the world), limited options for migration outside of South America, and the inaccessibility of many

consumer goods as examples. “Even when I can find it on the internet, no one will ship to me here!” my friend Gustavo often complained. Media like television and films from the United States, Mexico, and Spain were readily available, but Bolivian productions did not circulate outside of the country, and often to a lesser extent than foreign media within the country. One could easily buy the latest releases of *Batman*, *Spiderman*, or *Harry Potter* and even WWE and AAA wrestling on pirated DVDs at any busy street corner, but finding films such as *American Visa* and *Zona Sur* by Sundance award winning Bolivian director, Juan Carlos Valdivia was difficult. Videos of Bolivian lucha libre were only available on youtube. As all my friends’ complaints made clear, Bolivians have largely not had access to the benefits of globalization.

### Luchadores’ Cosmopolitan Desires

Of course, globalization is not “new” phenomenon in Bolivia or anywhere. Cultural exchange began with the first trade routes evident in the archaeological record, but became increasingly “global” in the context of colonization. In Bolivia, even before the colonization of the Americas, a number of different groups—mostly notably the Inca—had tried to conquer the city of La Paz, then called Chuquiago (Klein 2003:17). The Aymara living in and near the city periodically were ruled by other groups, and with different ruling groups were exposed to cultural differences. However, Pizarro’s arrival in 1532 represented a different kind of change in rule, where subjects were governed by people from a distant continent. Thus, distant events impacted local spaces, and local events had global ramifications (Inda and Rosaldo 2008:9).

While it may be widely acknowledged that the world is already globalized (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1990; Miller 1995), Boellstorf points out that “globalization is more than background noise” (2005:225). He writes that often it is assumed the effects of globalization correlate to class such that the richer someone is, the more they are affected by globalization, and

thus, the more “Westernized” their lifestyle. But as he astutely puts it “Any Nike factory worker in Indonesia could tell you, however, class is poorly correlated with the degree to which someone is impacted by globalizing forces” (2003: 232-233). For the luchadores, lucha libre was always already part of globalization. If not for the cultural exchange of Mexican luchadores traveling throughout South America in the 1950s and 1960s, they would not have been part of the tradition.

But globalization does not exist as a single instance of unidirectional flows of ideas. Rather, globalization has fostered linkages, mixture, interaction, mobility, and exchange in new ways (Inda and Rosaldo 2008:2). For the luchadores, the rapid global circulation of capital, people, commodities, images, and ideologies have fostered a desire for cosmopolitanism. They watched WWE and AAA DVDs for ideas on new moves or to incorporate the styles of foreign wrestlers they admired. They joined online international groups of wrestlers to invite foreign wrestlers to visit Bolivia to be featured in local events. And occasionally, the most dedicated wrestlers like Edgar, Roberto, and Victor were able to briefly travel abroad to Argentina or Chile to participate in wrestling events through these networks.

Mexican lucha libre indeed has had a profound impact on the sport in Bolivia. Not only were the origins of the sport in Bolivia sourced from Mexico, but the influence was constantly reinforced. In the 1950s and 1960s televised Mexican wrestling was very popular in Bolivia, and the popular wrestling films from Mexico City also found an enthusiastic audience in La Paz. This form of media exchange persisted, and during my fieldwork, fans watched Mexican wrestling on television more often than they attended live shows produced by Bolivian luchadores. When I spoke with audience members at local live shows, both men and women from their late teens to late fifties, mentioned Mexico first when listing the other countries whose wrestling programs

they watched on television or the internet. Only one person I spoke with did not watch international wrestling at all. Similarly, when I asked who their favorite wrestlers were, few mentioned Bolivians, but many named wrestlers like Rey Misterio and Eddie Guerrero who began wrestling in Mexico and have gained international fame.

Clearly, Mexican wrestlers are still very popular in La Paz, and occasionally visit, as in September of 2011 when Mexican wrestlers L.A. Park, Lapida, Cripta, Dunkel, Kung Fu Jr., and Hijo del Santo arrived in La Paz to participate in a lucha libre festival. Local Paceños flocked to these appearances, in numbers far higher than for shows put on by Bolivian companies. These events were usually held in the Julio Borelli Coliseum with capacity for several thousand audience members, while local shows were held in the Multifuncional de El Alto or the Coliseo de Villa Victoria which accommodated only a few hundred spectators.

Wrestling from the United States was almost as popular, with Bolivian audience members listing wrestlers like Hulk Hogan, Mick Foley, The Rock, and Kane as their favorites. However, based on what fans and luchadores told me, famous US wrestlers have never made an appearance in Bolivia. Instead, many people became fans when they watched WWE shows broadcast weekly on Bolivian television, or the show's DVDs purchased in street markets. Many fans agreed that they were attracted by the overwhelming production value that goes into US wrestling. As one fan put it, "Por calidad luchística me gusta ver la de Mexico y por el show la de EEUU" [For the quality of wrestling I like to watch lucha libre from Mexico and for the show, wrestling from the US].

The Super Catch luchadores also enjoyed watching Mexican and U.S. wrestling, feeling that by watching talented wrestlers they could improve their own performances. When I began training, Edgar and Jorge gave me videos of WWE and AAA performances to help me

understand the “estilo” [style] and bodily comportment I should aim for in the ring. They told me that they too continue to study videos of US and Mexican wrestling to help them with their own styles and to learn new claves.

Both the luchadores’ and fans’ consumption of live events and televised shows demonstrate the ways foreign forms of wrestling are consumed in Bolivia. Such consumption of consumer goods (Cannon and Yaprak 2002, Harvey 2001) and media (Appadurai 1996) are commonly cited in discussions of cosmopolitanism as a way in which local subjects interact with global processes. But the cosmopolitanism of consumption is available, if not necessary, for all urban Bolivians. The cheapest clothing in the La Paz area is to be found in the outdoor markets of El Alto that sell used Gap, Old Navy, American Eagle, and Hollister clothing. For those that can afford it, new Levi’s and United Colors of Benetton clothing is the most sought after and can be purchased in licensed shops in the Shopping Norte or MegaCenter malls. Television is dominated by series from the U.S., Colombia, Mexico, and Spain. Films in the major theaters are Hollywood blockbusters, and the games in the adjacent arcades have the instructions written in Korean. Toyota, Nissan, and Volkswagon vehicles clog the busy streets, and in La Paz it is often easier to find a slice of pizza than the more “traditional” anticuchos or tucumanas. Subway sandwich shops dot the downtown area, and both Burger King and its subsidiary La Quinta—which sells Bolivian fast food—are popular lunch restaurants. At the Hipermaxi and Ketal supermarkets Ragú pasta sauce, Heinz ketchup, and Kellogs cereals are displayed on the shelves.

Scholarship that concentrates on these types of consumption as enactments of cosmopolitanism is sometimes criticized for mirroring colonialism’s unidirectional flows from a North Atlantic core to a global periphery, positioning specific Western positionalities as those to be emulated (Mignolo 2010, Holmwood 2007). For the Super Catch luchadores, these types of

consumption were barely worth noting. They certainly enjoyed consuming the videos of international wrestling that they bought from street vendors and traded among themselves. They often wore t-shirts featuring WWE wrestlers, and hung posters with the same likenesses on their bedroom walls. But the kinds of cosmopolitanism they desired and sometimes claimed came through engagement with international wrestling. This was accomplished through embodying moves and styles they learned by watching international wrestlers and interacting with them—either online or through travel. The Super Catch luchadores wanted to move beyond incorporating the global into their local practice and exert an influence on these international formations as well. Though they take the international as the standard, they also feel they have something to contribute to this circulation.

When I would ask what their ultimate dreams were, many male luchadores from Super Catch and LIDER mentioned they hoped to wrestle outside of Bolivia some day. Though several traveled for a week or two to perform in events abroad, Rocky Aliaga was the only Bolivian luchador who had been able to achieve full time employment and residency outside of South America. Rocky had been wrestling in Spain and Portugal for almost a decade and was constantly mentioned by other Bolivian wrestlers as a figure to which they aspired. Many of the luchadores still in Bolivia told me he was the one “success story” of a luchador “making it” outside of South America. In an online conversation, Rocky told me the reasons that it was so hard for Bolivians to be hired as luchadores outside of the country was that they were seen as less skilled.

And Super Catch luchadores knew Rocky’s contentions to be true. While they dreamt that someday they might be able to live and wrestle abroad professionally, many hoped that traveling on a more temporary level would help them to gain exposure. When I began wrestling

with Super Catch other luchadores would often ask me to put them in contact with wrestlers I knew in the United States in hopes of organizing an international trip or inviting US wrestlers to Bolivia. Visiting wrestlers from countries like Chile, Peru, and Argentina were an occasional occurrence, which was always maximized for publicity for local groups. But U.S. wrestlers had never appeared in La Paz, and they hoped I might be able to help invite some.

Super Catch luchadores saw the connections they were able to make on the internet as one of the most important ways they could work toward international exposure. Whether inviting foreign luchadores to perform in La Paz or organizing their trips to perform in Lima, Santiago, or Buenos Aires, Facebook was a primary mode way they connected with an international “community” of wrestlers. Often after a long afternoon of training in Don Mauricio’s ring, we would walk back to Avenida 16 de Julio and stop in one of the small restaurants for the daily special. After shoveling giant plates of silpancho, pique macho, or falso conejo into our mouths and washing them down with mocoichinchi (a peach flavored drink), we would walk a block further to the small shop with several computers set up as an internet café.

For just 50 centavos an hour we would sit in a row at the computers, and almost everyone would be on their Facebook page. Of course the luchadores would look at their Paceño friends’ pictures and send birthday wishes to cousins or schoolmates, but they spent most of their time connecting with wrestlers from other countries. All of the luchadores were members of online virtual Facebook groups of South American and international wrestlers. Occasionally these groups would have scheduled discussions, and the Super Catch luchadores always made a point to participate. Discussions ranged from the latest WWE pay-per-view program to moves wrestlers were working on. But the most important were discussions about travel and the arrival of visiting wrestlers.



I often would finish sending emails to friends in the U.S. and exhausting everything I could think of to look at on Facebook long before they finished their conversations with Peruvian, Mexican, and Spanish wrestlers. Sometimes I was relieved to be asked to translate a message that someone received from a U.S. wrestler just because it gave me something to do. We would stay at the internet shop sometimes for almost two hours, as I silently whined in my head that it was already 9pm and I just wanted to go home and sleep. But I slowly understood the importance of these interactions. For just 0.50 Bolivianos an hour (about \$0.07) the luchadores could participate in a group of international wrestlers.

This global networking online can be understood as a kind of imagined cosmopolitanism in which desire overcomes spatial constraints and individuals are able to acquire “worldliness through engagement, in whatever form, with the world’s goods and lifestyles” (Schein 1999:359). Here, the “lifestyle” of international legitimacy is practiced using the internet and membership in international groups. Schein draws on Anderson, using the notion of imagining to demonstrate the ways participants in cosmopolitanism may not necessarily meet face-to-face, but nonetheless fashion communities that are just as genuine as those created by people who share physical space. These online communities that seemingly granted legitimacy were just as important for the Super Catch luchadores as being a part of local lucha libre circles. In many ways, they valued their international connections more highly, because they saw them as legitimizing, while they understood the local as degrading.

As Schein point outs, it is electronic media that allows this sort of “supralocal transmission” to occur. So while media like television and film in Bolivia were fairly unidirectional, the interactive nature of the internet (even if it was infuriatingly slow at times), allowed for a horizontal exchange “that brings into possibility an imagining of community on the

scale of the globe” (Schein 1999:359). Within these new “communities” identifications may be refashioned (Shohat and Stam 1996:145). For the luchadores, their involvement with wrestlers outside of Bolivia allowed them to see themselves and the group as part of “international lucha libre” despite the fact that they rarely if ever traveled to perform outside of Bolivia, and visits by foreign wrestling groups were occasional. These connections allowed them to imagine the eradication of economic exclusions, and restrictions imposed by state borders that their own particular citizenship determined. Yet, even as cosmopolitan exchange allowed for the imagining of mobility, it was also conditioned by the endurance of relative physical immobility (Schein 1999:269) that the luchadores knew was part of their reality. Appadurai writes that “Fantasy is now a social practice” (1996:7) and many people long for horizontality described by Anderson (1983:7), without global differentials of power and wealth (Schein 1999:369). For the luchadores, these differentials were manifested in their desire for legitimacy.

#### The Problem of Luchadoras Payasas

Yet legitimacy continued to be fleeting for the Super Catch luchadores. Clearly the reputation of Bolivian lucha libre among wrestlers outside of Bolivia was part of a global dynamic in which Bolivia either appeared invisible or was understood as derivative of better established wrestling traditions in Mexico or the United States. As Rocky Aliaga explained to me, people in other countries only knew what they saw of Bolivian lucha libre on the internet. “Aquí llega información de monstruos, momias, hombrelobos...En Bolivia hay talento y nuevos valores, pero sin dar oportunidad. Cada una lucha hasta tres veces para no dar oportunidad a jóvenes. Por eso se disfrazan de monstruos” [Here they find information about monsters, mummies, wolfmen...In Bolivia there is talent and new values, but without opportunity. Each match of three falls doesn’t give the opportunity to young wrestlers. That’s why they costume

themselves as monsters]. Rocky confirms here what those luchadores still in Bolivia suspect: that in the larger world of exhibition wrestling they are seen either as a joke or as underdeveloped. But the luchadores often attribute this formation to the local dynamics of clowning rather than global processes

Though Edgar complained about almost all of the matches in the Titanes del Ring event we saw together, he usually used the feminine form “payasas” instead of the masculine and more gender neutral term “payasos.” For he, Jorge, and other critical luchadores, the cholitas stand in as emblematic of the “problem.” In September of 2011, after returning to the United States for a few months, I posted some pictures of cholitas luchadoras from Titanes del Ring on a website. Two days later, I noticed that Edgar had written in the comments section, “Por que muestras estas payasas de El Alto si tu hablaste con los mejores luchadores de Bolivia y los más antiguos? Si hasta criticabas a estos bueyes por que los promocionas? Hay grandes profesionales que puedes mostrar como LFX, Halcones del Ring, Super Catch...Que mal!” [Why do you show these female clowns from El Alto if you have talked with the best and oldest Bolivian wrestlers? Until you criticize these oxen, why do you promote them? There are great professionals you can show like LFX, Halcones del Ring, Super Catch...How awful!]. Anarkista, a luchador from GLLP in Santa Cruz, Bolivia agreed, “Bien dicho.... Sabemos que hay mejores luchadores que estas cosas.” [Well said... We know there are better wrestlers than these things]. I eventually removed the pictures from the website, but the conversation they had evoked stuck with me. As a foreigner, putting pictures of the cholitas luchadoras on a website only exacerbated the “problem” male luchadores were working so hard to “correct.” To Edgar and Anarkista I was reinforcing the image of Bolivian lucha libre that they were constantly working against. The luchadoras were the most visible example of Bolivian lucha libre outside of the country, but as

Edgar explained to me many times, to the wrestlers of Super Catch they were not representative of the true talent within Bolivia.

This is not to say that the Super Catch luchadores thought the cholitas luchadoras were bad simply because they were women or enacting cholita characters. Certainly it was possible for a cholita character to have a high level of agility and skill. In fact, the luchadoras that wrestled with Super Catch wore polleras and braids, and were just as skilled as the men in the group. They were well respected and treated as equals. But the popularity of cholitas luchadoras from Titanes del Ring positioned them as the most visible example of the ways characters with gimmicks—whether they be cholitas, monsters, or clown characters complete with a red nose and balloons—gave Bolivian lucha libre as a whole the reputation of being inferior on an international level.

## CHAPTER 4

### LOCAL LUCHADORAS: REPRESENTING INDIGENEITY AND INDIGENISMO

On my first day of training, when Edgar asked if I'd rather my traje have pants or a pollera, I immediately knew pants made more sense. Perhaps they would not provide the visual beauty of a pollera swirling through the air, but they certainly would be easier to wrestle in. And Edgar was not the only person who suggested I wrestle in a pollera. The LIDER luchadoras, Juanita and Benita were constantly trying to get me into one. On a Friday afternoon while we sipped coffee at a stall in Mercado Lanza, the two giggled trying to decide what color pollera would look best on me. Juanita was wearing a blue sparkly shawl and Benita's was white. They took turns holding them up to my face to see what color would look nice on a gringa. But even with all their excitement, a pollera would have made me uncomfortable because I simply didn't feel I had a claim to wearing one.

The pollera in many ways is a symbol of indigeneity in Bolivia. It is not just a piece of clothing, but connotes identification with indigeneity, and recalls the long history of indigenous peoples' various struggles. I was a norteamericana, from a middle-class family, with plenty of higher education, and practically no racial stigma in my home country. To wear a pollera while wrestling seemed like it could easily be taken as a racial affront on the level of blackface minstrelsy. It seemed to me that only women who could claim indigenous identification could possibly be viewed as serious wrestlers while wearing a pollera. And as Edgar, Jorge, and Victor's comments had indicated, even they may appear to be "payasas" when they wrestled in them.

### Performing in Polleras and Other Symbols of Indigeneity

One of the most frequent questions I was asked about my research by academics and interested acquaintances was whether the luchadoras “are really indigenous.” Almost all of the luchadoras, in formal interview settings made reference to themselves as indigenous or belonging to a particular indigenous group. This was not surprising given that Bolivia is a country that is majority indigenous. In the 2001 census, 63% of respondents over age 15 identified themselves as indigenous (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas de Bolivia/UMPA, 2003:157). In the La Paz area, this demographic was almost 74%. Yet, Canessa cautions against falling into an essentialist trap in describing indigenous peoples, and suggests that “who is and who isn’t indigenous and what it means to be indigenous in Latin America is highly variable, context-specific and changes over time (2012:9-10; see also Barnard 2006; Canessa 2006; de la Cadena 2000; Kuper 2003; Larson and Harris 1995; Warren and Jackson 2002). Though “hegemonic regional ideology” sees Indian and mestizo as closed and bipolar categories, people attach labels to themselves and others through fluid and contingent processes. “Depending on the circumstances of daily life, a person has almost limitless possibilities to construct and mix, Indian and/or mestizo identities” (de la Cadena 1995:331). The luchadoras, like most of their fellow Paceños and Alteños called themselves indigenous, but this did not necessarily indicate their socio-economic status or that they did not also identify as mestiza.

Rather than understanding people who identify as indigenous as living in originary communities, speaking indigenous languages, and participating in pro-Columbian spiritual beliefs, indigeneity in Bolivia is more complex. The 2001 census reported that 51% of indigenous-identified Bolivians lived in urban areas, and as Canessa points out, “At least some of these people are individuals who in most contexts would be considered unambiguously white”

(2006:256). Like his example of the son of German and Polish immigrants who claimed to be indigenous, I met pale-skinned young adults who attended college in the United States that called themselves indigenous, and attended a birthday party where a young woman that I at first assumed to be foreign introduced herself as Huyra. “Its in Aymara!” she proudly told me in English.

The luchadoras no doubt had as much claim to indigeneity as any other Bolivian. Most reported to me that they considered themselves indigenous (or specifically Aymara) because their parents or grandparents migrated to the La Paz area from indigenous communities near Lake Titicaca, the northern Altiplano, or Las Yungas, the semi-tropical jungle that is to the South of La Paz. During my first interview with Carmen Rosa, she mentioned being an Aymara woman when explaining what the general population thinks of the cholitas luchadoras. I then asked if she identified as an Aymara woman and she responded

Si, yo me identifico...Nos identificamos, yo identifico como mujer Aymará. Y me siento orgullosa ser mujer Aymara porque mi papa es de los Yungas y mi mama es del pueblo de Warisata así que soy hija de Aymaras y me siento feliz.

Yes, I identify...We identify, I identify as an Aymara woman. And I am proud to be an Aymara woman because my father is from the Yungas and my mother is from the town of Warisata [in the altiplano], so I am the daughter of Aymaras and I feel happy.

Carmen’s response was typical of all the luchadoras whom I explicitly asked about their indigeneity. Despite their residence in urban La Paz working-class neighborhoods rather than agricultural regions, and despite their inability to speak indigenous languages, the luchadoras referenced their indigenous heritage in discussing their identification.

These types of responses are not at all surprising. As Canessa notes, there are plenty of upper class Bolivians that chew coca leaves, and elite Zona Sur residents who hire indigenous religious yatiris to ch’alla [give a blessing for] their new homes (2006:255). Almost all young Paceños I knew would pour out a little alcohol for the Pachamama, or at least dedicate it to her

when it was accidentally spilled. My mestizo friends were just as likely to celebrate New Year's Eve by attending an all night festival at the pre-Inca archaeological site of Tiwanaku as in a techno club in the trendy Sopocachi neighborhood. And almost everyone I knew made a point of going to buy *alasitas*, minatures of whatever one's heart desired—cars, houses, US dollar bills, love amulets, even Ph.D.s from US universities—and have them blessed by a *yatiri* in the mid-January festival of Ekeko. This practice was to ensure that some time in the coming year, they would receive a real-life version of the miniatures they bought. The *luchadoras*, like almost everyone I knew, incorporated into their lives these types of behavior and beliefs that were understood to be based in indigenous tradition.

Indigeneity, particularly as it exists today in Bolivia is not a static state, but is a form of racial, social, and political positionality that may be claimed or discarded depending on the specific circumstance. Indigeneity is not an “uncontested category of domination,” but a “contingent category negotiated by individual and collective subjects” (Postero 2007:11). Bigenho stresses that indigeneity should not be understood as part of a binary in which mestizos and criollos are contrasted to indigenous peoples who are easily distinguished and located within the clearly bounded position of being on the receiving end of a system of domination (2007). Rather, because of its variable, context-specific nature, mobilizing an indigenous self-identification requires that it be performed in the sense that an enactment is always a presentation, if only to the actor him or herself (Palmer and Jankowiak 1996:240).

The *cholitas luchadoras* specifically performed their indigeneity through their language, bodily movement, dress, and music. These aspects of performance were used as part of the highly social, contextual, and collective achievement that Gray (2009) understands as identification. Gumperz (1982), and Bucholtz and Hall (2005) explain identification as the



outcome of strategic or habitual processes through which people continuously index similarity and difference in relation to others. They among other scholars (Hollander 2001, Johnson 2003) focus on the ways these relationships are manifest through language, while many other anthropologists have explored identification as manifest in spatial and temporal existence (Johnson 2003, Mitchell 2000, Mort 1995, 1998, Rappaport 1979:148), purchase or use of consumer goods (Bourdieu 1984, Mort 1995, 1998, Tomlinson 1990), bodily comportment (Bourdieu 2006, Halberstam 1998, Mauss 1973), and dress (Adkins and Lury 1999, Atluri 2009, Halberstam 1998). Taken together these enactments form what Gray calls “cultural assemblages that work with the materials on hand” (2009:19).

The moniker “cholitas luchadoras” is usually the first way audiences encounter the luchadoras’ performances of indigeneity. Cholita is a term whose definition is specific to the Andes, but is just one of many words the luchadoras could use to reference a local identification. Words such as *mujer de pollera*, *indígena*, *mujer Aymara*, or even *chola* all seemed like likely contenders. The meanings of these terms certainly overlap, and are sometimes used interchangeably. Nicole, a young Paceña fan at Titanes del Ring used several of the terms when she explained to me why she liked watching the cholitas luchadoras

Una indígena es una mujer fuerte. Una mujer que sabe lo que quiere, luchadora como ella sola. La Chola Paceña es la incansable trabajadora...La mujer de pollera, no todas son como ellas. Hoy en día no valoramos tanto lo que hacen. Desde la hora promedio en la que se levantan hasta los hijos que tienen que criar al mismo tiempo están trabajando...Una mujer aymara no solo es aquella que lleva una pollera y que se denomina originaria. Es la que va a trabajar para sacar a una familia adelante cueste lo que cueste! No va a buscar un marido con dinero y que le cumpla sus deseos como podemos lamentablemente ver hoy en día en nuestra sociedad, una mujer de pollera, una mujer aymara va a sacar pecho porque sabe lo que quiere y lo va a conseguir. Vemos como están mujeres se deben valorar a sí mismas ante todo y dar todo lo que tienen ya que su legado responde a ello...ella me parece que es una gran muestra de valor y de fuerza. La cholita en toda Bolivia no solo muestra trabajo y fuerza sino también esmero.

An indigenous woman is a strong woman. A woman that knows what she wants, a fighter on her own. The Chola Paceña is an untiring worker... The *mujer de pollera*, not all are like them. These days we don't value as much what they do. From the early morning when they get up, to the children they have to raise at the same time they are working... An Aymara woman is not just a woman that wears a *pollera* and that is of indigenous origins. She is the one who works to support her family no matter the cost! She is not going to search for a husband with money and that fulfills her dreams as we can unfortunately see today in our society. A *mujer de pollera*, an Aymara woman is going to take to heart what she wants and is going to get it. We see how there are women that value themselves in every situation and give everything that they have already as their legacy... it seems to me that she is a great demonstration of courage and strength. The *cholita* in all of Bolivia is not only showing work and strength, but also perseverance.

In her narrative, Nicole used five different ways of referring to indigenous women, which she associated with the *cholitas luchadoras*. During my fieldwork, these five identifications were often conflated, but understood to have slightly different connotations.

An Aymara woman is a member of the most populous indigenous group in the La Paz area. Like Carmen Rosa, many Paceña women identified as Aymara, linking themselves to a specific indigenous culture even if they no longer lived in an Aymara community or spoke the language. *Mujer de pollera* was most often a descriptor used to indicate a woman who wears the *pollera* as part of her everyday life. For the women and men I interviewed, it was not necessarily used as a self-description except when specifically referring to clothing. Yet as Nicole's narrative indicates, it was often used in reference to women who wear *polleras* in general and the specific assumptions associated with it—both strength and indigeneity among them. But while Aymara or Quechua woman were very specific terms, *mujer de pollera* was not. The term is common throughout the Andes, from highland Ecuador to Southern Perú, and sometimes into Colombia, Argentina and Chile (Weismantel 2001:269).

Chola was equally widespread in use throughout the Andes but carried a specifically urban connotation. Originally it simply meant an urban woman who complicated the

designations between racial categories through incorporation of urban (Spanish) speech, dress, and food preferences (Klein 2003:50), and later became particularly associated with business activities (Prudencio Claure 1978:51).

But local Paceños and Alteños are not the only spectators to which the name appeals. Chola had also been iconized in a particular way that gives the word salience among international travelers to the Andes, and some foreigners who might learn of the luchadoras through print media. Most often the word “chola” that was used to describe widely-circulating representations of female Bolivian indigeneity such as the rural woman posing with a llama on postcards, the Lonely Planet guide’s short summary of Bolivian indigenous peoples, or even the sexy cholita dancing in Carnival-esque parades (Albro 2000:69). The chola no longer only referenced urban indigenous women selling produce in street markets, but also provided inspiration for the costumes worn by young mestiza women promoting dessert brands in upscale grocery stores and drag performers using the city streets for activist theatrics. The luchadoras’ characters no doubt have become one more prominent iconized image of the chola circulating both locally and globally. In fact, images of cholas circulated to the extent that they have been divorced from the real chola marketwomen who have historically been political agents (Albro 2000:69). Nonetheless there were still women who identified themselves as cholas or cholitas, including Benita and Juanita.

Particularly for foreign audience members who might not understand the subtleties of difference, to use “cholita” calls upon these images with which they are more likely to be familiar. Yet when I asked Juanita why the luchadoras chose “cholita” as their name, rather than “chola,” “mujer de pollera” [woman who wears a pollera] or “indígena” [indigenous woman], she gave an answer that focused more on the name’s reception with local audience members. She

told me that though she was not one of the original luchadoras who took on the name, she felt cholitas was appropriate because “Bueno, cholitas...cholas es la palabra muy común. Las Cholas Paceñas. Eh...como decirte? Cholo, de los Aymaras es lo más visto. Cholita no sé por qué, pero siempre es con más cariño. Mujeres de pollera también lo dicen. Lo dicen, pero siempre cholitas digamos porque son como caracteres.” [Well, cholitas...cholas is the really common word. The Cholas Paceñas. Eh, how can I tell you? Cholo, of the Aymaras is the most seen. Cholita I don’t know why, but it is always with more affection. They also say mujeres de pollera. They say it, but we always say cholitas because they are like characters.].

Juanita acknowledged the ways Aymaras women and mujeres de pollera are connected, while highlighting the fact that “cholitas” was chosen by the first luchadoras and continued to be used because it named a character, and one that garnered affection.

Juanita’s claim that it was a term with affection was echoed by several audience members, one of whom told me “Las cholitas [luchadoras] son populares porque se identifican como parte de la comunidad” [The cholitas luchadoras are popular because they identify as part of the community]. Though specific indigenous communities certainly exist (such as Carmen Rosa’s mother’s pueblo of Warisata), the audience member instead refers to a broader, less defined notion of indigenous community. She seems to reference one of an imagined sort, on a much smaller scale than Anderson’s notion of a nationalistic “imagined community” (1983). Yet, like the ways nationalism creates a sense of group identification among people who have never met through the use of certain symbols (language, maps, census categories, artifacts, etc.), “community” is used here to reference shared symbolic ways of identifying among indigenous highland Bolivians.

The LIDER luchadora Angela also pointed out that she was especially proud to call herself a cholita because “El término chola era usado como falta de respeto. Pero ahora estamos orgullosas de llamarnos a nosotras mismas cholitas” [The term cholas was used with disrespect. But now we’re proud to call ourselves cholitas]. She suggested that not only was the term cholita important to the community (“we’re proud”), but that it demarcated a boundary. It had been used with disrespect by those outside the indigenous community, indicating the group to which she claimed belonging was more exclusive than just being Bolivian or Paceño. By foregrounding the differences she saw as salient between the smaller group and the larger, Angela differentiated the cholitas luchadoras from the larger Paceño community using a strategy Bucholtz and Hall describe as distinction (Bucholtz and Hall 2005:599). As Kirschenblatt-Gimblet points out, authenticity relies on an Other; the existence of, or opposition to a shared culture or history (1995:239). Thus to point out Others—those who discriminated against cholas and mujeres de pollera—Angela strengthened her own and her fellow luchadoras’ alignment with an imagined indigenous community.

The luchadoras also made reference to their place in the community through their speech during performances. They often addressed the audience as “amigas” [friends (feminine)], specifically appealing to the women in the audience on a level of familiarity to indicate that they shared salient ways of identifying. At times this claim was made even more specific such as in a LIDER match I saw on 15 May 2011, in the Coleseo de Villa Victoria. The match between Benita and Dina began with them entering the ring and hugging. They continued showing signs of friendship until the referee started pulling Benita’s braids from behind so that it seemed as if Dina had done it. He then pulled Dina’s braids in the same manner, switching off until they eventually started wrestling. When the two women realized how the referee had tricked them,

they teamed up against him, and Juanita came to his aid. No one was ever pinned to end the match, but the wrestling eventually stopped when Juanita grabbed the microphone and declared to the audience that she was far superior to the others and would prove it in the ring the following week. Then Benita grabbed the microphone and appealed to the audience: “Somos con el público! Somos mujeres de pollera y estamos con ustedes!” [We are with you, audience! We are mujeres de pollera and we are with you!].

Carmen Rosa more subtly referenced her connection to the community in a radio interview I heard on 16 March 2011. On the El Alto based Rádio Atipiri, which is affiliated with the Centro de Educación y Comunicación para Comunidades y Pueblos Indígenas [Center of Education and Communication for Indigenous Communities and Towns], she explained how she chose her nombre de guerra [wrestling name]. “El nombre de luchadora de ‘Carmen Rosa’ me pusé en memoria de mi suegra de pollera que se dedicaba a la pollería y vendía a las comparsas folklóricas de Cota Cota (de La Paz) esa prenda de la mujer boliviana” [The name Carmen Rosa I took in memory of my mother-in-law who dressed de pollera, who was dedicated to her pollera shop and selling folkloric accessories of Cota Cota (neighborhood of La Paz), and the garments of the Bolivian woman] (16 March 2011). She called the neighborhood by name, and drew on notions of longevity and traditionalism in mentioning her mother-in-law. She pointed to a specific person who was recognized as being part of the community not only because she wore polleras, but because her shop made them available to other community members. By highlighting her personal relationship, she bolstered her “right” to use the name, similar to the way that political parties refer to their “ancestors” to authenticate themselves as “native to this place” (Albro 2000:38).

A central aspect of this narrative provided by Carmen Rosa was the pollera itself. In the ring, polleras went beyond their use as photographic focal points and were also important to performing as cholita characters. Clothing choices are common ways of referencing identification across the world. Certainly for foreign viewers, the pollera stands out in contrast to Western dress, thus marking the luchadoras as distinct from themselves and the Bolivians they encountered wearing jeans or suits. But the pollera also connotes identification as indigenous among local audience members. As Johnson points out, in the 1960s, “African” garb was often associated with “real” blackness in the U.S. “The more African garb one donned, the more authentically black and ‘down’ one became” (2003:26). Though Johnson criticizes this as a fetishization and commodification of a “mythic African past,” the claiming of self-identification through dress is common in many contexts. By dressing similarly to the group with which they hope to identify, the cholitas luchadoras use similarity or the strategy of “adequation” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005:599).

Juanita demonstrated this clearly she told me that the luchadoras wore polleras because “la mujer de pollera...Es la característica, por eso. Por la elegancia, aparte de que nos gusta mucho a esta ropa. Yaaaa” [the mujer de pollera....It is characteristic, that’s why. For the elegance, apart from the fact that we like this clothing a lot. Yaaaa]. In *Goddesses of the Ring*, Yolanda further explained why she feels dressing de pollera in the ring is central to their performances

I think the success is due to our polleras. We go up into the ring, to do our show wearing our polleras... We are not just for show. We are the real thing. A male sport that women now practice. And not just women de vestida, but also us, the cholitas. Who wear this indigenous clothing for which people often make fun of us or belittle us. Just because some of us began working as maids to earn a living...I don’t think that women in a pollera should be limited to the house or be a maid. Women have proved that we can do anything a man can do.

She suggests that their success relies on their authenticity (“the real thing”), and their authenticity in turn depends in large part on the pollera. Yolanda uses this as an opportunity to discuss stigma associated with the pollera. She suggests that in “prov[ing] that we can do anything a man can do” mujeres de pollera have risen above the stereotypes that relegate them to domestic work. Because they are worthy adversaries they combat both gender and racial limitations at once.

The pollera is so important because of its history and the meanings that continue to be associated with it. It is not just a costume, but a “document” of aesthetic, religious, social, and material value (Presta 2010:52, see also Phipps 2004:17). It is based on sixteenth century provincial Spanish women’s style (Jones 2007:30), but became popular among indigenous urban women in Bolivia in the eighteenth century when they began wearing them to differentiate themselves from rural women (Gill 1993:104). These urban women were instrumental in forming the markets in cities, and the pollera style referenced an elevated status associated with economic activity (Presta 2010:42-43).

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the pollera began to be associated with certain political stances as well. Though indigenous women have participated in revolutionary movements since the first anti-colonial struggles in Upper Peru, with women’s involvement in anarchist syndicates in La Paz, the association between the pollera and protest first became widely recognized around 1900 (Lehm and Rivera Cusicanqui 1988). During the late 1920s and 1930s, women in general were becoming more widely politicized on issues of education, work, and suffrage. Women from the upper classes primarily organized around the right to work, but this lacked salience for working-class women who were already part of the labor force (Lehm and Rivera Cusicanqui 1988: 37-38).



Instead, they placed emphasis on changing their legal status to get full citizenship rights (Stephenson 1999:29), and used these claims to citizenship to argue for improved working conditions. This fomented the decision of many urban working women to organize into unions. What have been described as “militant labor unions” (Stephenson 1999:11) coalesced in the umbrella organization, Federación Obrera Feminina (FOF) [Women’s Labor Federation], as part of the anarchist Federación Obrera Local (FOL) [Local Labor Federation]. Members of the FOF were considered to be crucial allies, particularly because of their “combativeness and unity” (Stephenson 1999:11).

But these women were not just “allies” supporting FOL endeavors. They also introduced demands for organized childcare, literacy courses, library resources, and cultural events aimed at Aymara women (Stephenson 1999:11). Seligman calls pollera-clad market vendors “legendary figures of working-class political solidarity” noting their participation in neighborhood organizations and communal kitchens in addition to the unions (1993:202). They were active participants in FOL-organized street demonstrations where their polleras were clearly visible.

It was in the context of these particular activities the conscious decision to wear the pollera became associated with both indigenous subjectivity and labor reform (Stephenson 1999:32). Further, working-class women’s politicization extended beyond labor organizing to their personal lives, in which many rejected institutions such as marriage. They also resisted notions of motherhood that would relegate them to the domestic sphere. Their work in the public arena of the marketplace or as domestic employees’ in other people’s homes where they often earned more than their male partners (Stephenson 1999:29) placed them outside the normative idealized gender subjectivity of the time. Indeed, Stephenson points out that because of their economic situation and gender subjectivity they were not easily conscripted into nationalist

discourses that they perceived to be new forms of colonialism (1999:29). Thus, the pollera came to represent not only women's labor reform, but a wider rejection of patriarchal and class-based expectations of daily life.

During the 1980s, the idea of the pollera as a symbol of resistance was further strengthened through a number of academic works focusing on women's union involvement and their use of traditional dress (such as the pollera) to claim public recognition of their citizenship (Lehm and Rivera 1988, Wadsworth and Dibbits 1989). However, as Sologuren points out, these studies present a homogenous image of working-class women, as subaltern, constantly conflicting with upper-classes, and without internal conflicts of their own (2006:87). Indeed, throughout these eras, not everyone saw the pollera as a sign of resistance. As she reminds us, competing understandings of the pollera often split along geographic lines, with urban working class sectors understanding the pollera as a political symbol, but with racially mixed communities on the outskirts of the city seeing the pollera as a more traditional expression of indigeneity or rural lifestyle.

Today it is not unusual to see mujeres de pollera involved in protest. Much as de la Cadena (2001:21) writes of Peru, within social movements clothing expressing indigenous identification was worn symbolically for the occasion. Indeed, for many Bolivians, the "pollera" represents political action and its wearer is considered to be a powerful agent of liberation (Wadsworth and Dibbits 1989:2).

The final common way the cholitas luchadoras performed indigeneity was through music. They often entered the arena dancing to cumbia music, which was associated with the Andean Altiplano. This music featured charrango, a small guitarlike instrument that originated in Bolivia, quena (end-blown flute), and pan-pipes and had a "dissonant" sound with parallel fourths and

fifths (Leichtman 1989:32). As Jones writes, “Music is one particularly effective way in which cholos create and maintain” the boundaries of what it means to be cholo in Cochabamba, Bolivia, (2007:i).

However, Cumbia music has been exported globally as an example of “authentic Andean music.” It has become one of the most internationally successful varieties of folkloric music in the world. Yet within Bolivia, it still represents national folklore (Bigenho 2007) and remains quite popular among locals (Cespedes 1984, 1993). Thus, Cumbia performed “Andeanness” for foreign tourists while maintaining authenticity for local audiences.

In addition to the music itself, the luchadoras danced in ways that further bolstered their performances of indigeneity. They would enter the arena and pass around the ring once, dancing for the audience to the music (Figure x). These dances were in a style similar to the folkloric dances of Carnival and other entradas, which Leichtman describes as a “walking type of dance” (1989:32). Rockefeller writes that this type of dancing is easily recognized, and though it is a meaningful part of Carnival it can be discussed, practiced, and enjoyed as a thing in itself (1999:130). As he demonstrates, these dances are understood by the participants, as well as educated urban classes (who sometimes are participants) and international tourists as “culture” which helps to preserve group identification (1999:127). Though the community members he quoted may have reified both culture and identity as timeless and immutable, this also serves as further indication that traditional elements like dance were a key way that participants and spectators performed indigeneity.



Figure 17. Antonia Enters the Arena and Dances for the Audience in a Titanes del Ring Event on 9 August, 2009.

As in folkloric festivals, the *cholitas luchadoras*' performances created a context in which indigeneity was identified through they symbols of music, dance, and clothing. And like many performances of indigeneity, "the value of these comes from their display, and their appreciation by others" (Rockefeller 1999:133). In *lucha libre*, the appreciation and importance was a product of both local spectators, and foreigners who attended live events or learned of *lucha libre* through print media or videos. By distilling representations of indigeneity into recognizable symbols, the *luchadoras* were able to appeal to two very different types of audience members.

### Historicizing Indigeneity & Indigenismo

The luchadoras were able to present themselves as cholitas using indigenous imagery, using both strategies of adequation and distinction, highlighting differences between themselves and those they portrayed as others, while emphasizing the salient similarities they shared with the group with which they hoped to be associated (Bucholtz and Hall 2005:599). Yet, Bucholtz and Hall also emphasize the importance of authentication and denaturalization, or the process of distinguishing realness from artifice (2005:601).

This may be especially important in this instance because the notion of indigeneity in Latin America, as part of a system of racial classification, is constantly in flux and under scrutiny. In Bolivia, indigeneity—as both a self-identification and an imposed form of subjectivity—has been instantiated through various means for different reasons since Spanish colonists arrived in the area known as Upper Perú during colonialism and Bolivia after independence. Though social class had existed under Inca rule, Spanish government under Viceroy Francisco de Toledo orchestrated a new form of social organization by consolidating peoples within diverse cultural and social locations into a single category—“Indian”—which became devalued and racialized. Colonial governors concluded that indigenous peoples represented a stagnated stage of development, and it was their duty to protect them (Wade 1997:27). But in exchange for this “protection,” indigenous people were forced to provide labor and tribute to the Spanish crown (Hylton and Thomson 2007:36). The colonial tribute system was justified through reference to discourses about biological race, through which the government established the *sistema de castas* [caste system]. Based on “blood purity,” the system ranked Spaniards (considered to be people of pure blood) at the top, castas (mixed blood people) in the middle, and Indians and Africans on the bottom (Cope 1994:4).

But these artificial categories were impossible to police, particularly because offspring of intermarried couples were not easily categorized. To confound the categories further, native people often migrated to cities and Spanish citizens sometimes moved to lands that were categorized as Indian (Larson 2004:30). The new city-dwelling Indians learned to speak Spanish, began eating Spanish-style food, and often traded their former dress styles for those of the Spanish. They became urban cholos, complicating designations between Indian, mestizo, and white that were based on ancestry, and transformed these categories into cultural or “social caste” terms determined by speech, dress, and food consumption (Klein 2003:50). Racial identifications became increasingly reliant upon social markers rather than ancestry, and people could pass from one category to another by changing their dress, place of residence, language, or working conditions. Thus, identification as “Indian” was based on elements of performance rather than some innate or immutable aspect of a person’s biology.

Undoubtedly, some people remained in their natal communities, and the Spanish government continued to exploit their labor and resources. By the 1730s, these exploitative practices had fomented local resistance (Hylton and Thomson 2007:37), and Indians began mounting rebellions in protest of abusive taxes (Klein 2003:73). At first, these revolts remained local, but by early 1780, Tomás Katari, an Aymara leader from Macha, organized forces to oppose Spanish rule and set off a chain of other movements in the region. In November of that year, forces in Cuzco (now in Peru) led by José Gabriel Condorcanqi, captured and hung the local Spanish administrator. Condorcanqui took the name Túpac Amaru after an Inca monarch who had been executed by the Spanish in 1572. In taking the name, he performed a claim to an indigenous legacy. As a well-educated and literate member of the Indian noble class, Túpac Amaru used his legitimate claims to leadership to convince many influential Quechua and

Aymara people that it was time to bring an end to unjust Spanish rule (Klein 2003:75). As Klein writes, this rebellion was massive in participation, coordination, and extension, encompassing over one hundred thousand troops. It stretched from Cuzco through all of Upper Perú and into Argentina and involved several different social classes (Klein 2003:74).

As part of this movement, commoner Julian Apaza emerged as an important military leader in 1781. He had no claims to leadership under Spanish rule or as a result of royal Inca ancestry, but through personal abilities was able to organize and lead a powerful forty thousand-person Indian Army. As he consolidated political, military, and spiritual authority, he adopted the name Túpac Katari to identify himself with Tomás Katari and Túpac Amaru (Hylton and Thomson 2007:40). Under his leadership, forces cleared the countryside of Spanish control and laid formal siege to La Paz. Between March and October 1781, these forces caused famine and outbreaks of disease in La Paz as a result of two separate periods of attacking the city. Along with his partner Bartolina Sisa, Túpac Katari settled on the edge of the altiplano overlooking La Paz, in the area that is now El Alto. Here he both encouraged Indians to take up arms against Spanish enemies, and invited creole and mestizo “compatriots” *compañeros* to join the cause, imagining a “cross-class, interethnic project” (Hylton and Thomson 2007:41). Among those who joined him were his own sister, Gregoria Apaza and her lover Andrés Mendingure, Túpac Amaru’s nephew. Together they seized the nearby area of Sorata themselves (Hylton and Thomson 2007:42). At the height of the insurrections, more than 100,000 Indians followed these leaders, laying siege to cities and killing many thousands of residents (Postero 2007:30).

Unfortunately, Túpac Amaru and his followers failed to win over a significant number of creole, mestizo, or urban working-class allies, and by the end of 1780 royalist forces were able to overcome the insurgency (Hylton and Thomson 2007:42). Royalist armies finally succeeded in

breaking the siege and sentenced Túpac Katari to be drawn and quartered on 14 November 1781 (Hylton and Thomson 2007:43). As his last words, he famously declared “I die as one, but I will come back as millions.” This allusion to future unity and continued struggle for indigenous peoples of the Andes is used as a reference in performances of indigeneity. As Hylton and Thomson point out, the symbolism invoked in these resistance movements recast indigenous subjectivity, through political consciousness and realization of indigenous people’s roles as historical agents (2007:19). Thus, the luchadoras’ use of characters that symbolize indigeneity reference both the discrimination faced by indigenous peoples within colonialism, and the ways that these people subverted and fought against their subjectivization.

The failed revolutions of Tomás Katari, Túpac Amaru, and Túpac Katari were some of the first of what became a wave of independence movements to sweep Latin America at the turn of the nineteenth century. Many criollos (“legitimate” Spanish descendants born in the new world) also hoped create a nation that was independent from Spain, but believed that an Indian initiative would not be sufficient to depose Spanish rule and thus began organizing to direct a rebellion (Hylton and Thomson 2007:44). Between 1807 and 1816 several resistance movements were mounted but none fully succeeded (Hylton and Thomson 2007:44). Finally in January of 1825 Venezuelan general José de Sucre marched his army to Upper Peru, and defeated what was the last royalist stronghold on the continent.

The Republic of Bolivia—named for Simón Bolívar, Sucre’s leader and friend—was free of Spanish control, but the lives of Indians did not change drastically. Bolívar, as first president of the Republic, sought to turn “Indians” into “Bolivians” by abolishing their involuntary employment and establishing just wages. Yet he did not grant the indigenous people that made up nearly two-thirds of the population the rights or status of “citizens” (Hylton and Thomson



2007:47-48). Most were employed within haciendas owned by criollos and the racialization of indigenous peoples persisted. Hylton and Thomson have referred to this formation as “nationality without citizenship,” in which elites imagined a future when Indians could share equal rights and benefits of civilization, but only through an “ethnocidal ideal” (2007:47-48).

Bolivia’s first Constitution reflected Bolívar’s intentions, but many provisions were never put into effect. Bolívar named his general Sucre as president in 1826 and returned to Perú where he signed a decree recognizing Bolivia’s independence. Even until the mid-twentieth century, the overwhelming racial ideology in the republic still adhered to the notion that “Indians” would be transformed into “Bolivians.” The census of 1900 notoriously predicted “the slow and gradual disappearance of the indigenous race,” arguing that “if there has been a single source of retardation in our civilization, it is the indigenous race, essentially resistant to all innovation and progress” (Choque and Mamani Condori 2003:148). Indeed, performances of indigeneity today may be understood within this history as a refusal to submit to erasure. The very fact that luchadoras perform as cholitas, rather than in spandex and masks as the men do, indicates a desire to politicize their characters. Their presence in public makes visible that “Indians” have not been fully homogenized as Bolivians.

Many Bolivian governments tried to incorporate “Indians” as “Bolivians,” but none were successful until the Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario (MNR) [National Revolutionary Movement]. They succeeded in organizing laborers, miners, the middle class, and Indian peasants under their leadership to cultivate a society based on economic development and modernization. After numerous attempts, the Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario (MNR) launched a rebellion in La Paz on April 9, 1952. Leaders seized state arsenals and distributed arms to both men and women civilians. Armed miners marched on La Paz and blocked the

troops who had been sent to reinforce the city. After three days of fighting, and about 600 deaths, the army completely surrendered (Klein 2003:207-208).

After gaining power the MNR government nationalized the mines, reformed agrarian policy, and instituted universal citizenship and suffrage (Postero 2007:37). Though the government was primarily mestizo, they envisioned themselves as prioritizing indigenous rights. The MNR government also abolished unpaid labor and instituted a land reform program that dismantled haciendas and redistributed land to tenants and indigenous communities (Hylton and Thomson 2007), while nationalizing mines and unionizing peasants into *sindecatos*.

The MNR government championed *mestizaje* as the means of crafting pan-racial national unity (Rios 2010:283). Legally, all “Indians” became “*campesinos*” [peasants], symbolically recasting the categorization through a lens of class rather than race. Within this new ethnocidal ideal, indigeneity was seen as a “primitive form condemned to disappear with the rapid processes of modernization” (Albó 1996:8). Yet the linguistic change symbolically made it easier for individuals to pass from one category to the other, in particular for indigenous people to become mestizos, supporting MNR’s goal of creating a Bolivian mestizo majority (Rios 2010:283-284). While racial mobility was positive for some, Postero argues that these formations only reinscribed discrimination in new institutions of citizenship (2007:41).

Instead of being associated with their native indigenous communities, the new “*campesinos*” were organized into *sindecatos* [labor unions], but in the decades following the revolution, the unions were increasingly brought under state control. In response, Indians began organizing as such in the 1970s and 1980s, and by the 1990s a powerful indigenous movement had emerged. Those involved mounted demonstrations demanding cultural recognition and territorial rights (Postero 2007:41). Goodale describes the year 1990 as a “watershed moment,”

because 700 indigenous Bolivians, marched for 35 days from Trinidad, in the lowlands, to La Paz in recognition of the 500th anniversary of the colonization of the Americas. For some Bolivians, this was seen as the fulfillment of Katari's prophecy that he would return as millions. With the marchers' arrival in La Paz, an indigenous movement was solidified with indigeneity symbolically represented by the Wiphalas [Andean first peoples flag] (Figure x) they had carried along with them (Goodale 2006:636).



Figure 18. Wiphala

This large protest received national and international attention, and centered indigenous politics within national concerns to the extent that the government was persuaded to recognize territorial rights of indigenous groups (Canessa 2006:246). President Sánchez de Lozada

sponsored constitutional, social, economic and political changes aimed at expanding citizenship for indigenous groups. These reforms were aimed at sovereignty of municipal governments and decision-making over resource allocation, expansion of social welfare programs, bilingual education, and implementing international human rights norms at the national level (Goodale 2006:637). Sánchez de Lozada's Law of Popular Participation began an era of "multiculturalism" in which indigeneity was re-recognized as a salient identification, and Indians were more thoroughly (at least symbolically) included in the nation as citizens.

These new discourses of multiculturalism and pluriethnic nationalism framed Bolivia as a nation of diverse parts which made up an integrated whole (Canessa 2006:246). During this era, being "indigenous" carried enormous material consequences. As Postero outlines, international NGOs gave funding to indigenous people for *etnodesarrollo* (ethnic development projects), membership in indigenous groups could mean access to land and the resources in rural areas, and in cities indigenous organizations had the right to make demands on municipal funds (2007:11). Thus, strategic representations of indigeneity abounded, meaning that when *luchadoras* began wrestling as *cholitas* in 2001, theirs was just one of a proliferation of visible depictions of indigenous peoples.

Yet, Sánchez de Lozada was the same man who in the 1980s, as Minister of Planning, implemented the neoliberal New Economic Policy, which adversely affected these same populations. As Klein explains, the effects of these policies in Bolivia were marked by enduring poverty, inequality and economic retardation (2003:254–256). As president, Sánchez de Lozada maintained his commitment to neoliberal measures, continuing to privatize natural resources and outsource utilities. Unemployment grew drastically and public services dwindled to the extent that the state did not fulfill even its most basic functions (Gill 2000).

As the 1990s ended, opposition to the state grew and social movements formed in order to contest the neoliberal development model. Campesinos, miners, laborers, teachers, students, pensioners, and others from the middle class organized, and often represented themselves using indigenous symbols, despite the fact that some had urban and middle class origins. The incorporation of the Wiphala and the coca leaf (Grisaffi 2010:427), which was known for being used in indigenous practices, lent credibility to claims to indigeneity. Canessa (2006) explains that the leaders of social movements encouraged the bases to identify themselves not only along class lines, but also as having a shared historical experience of oppression at the hands of an ethnically different elite group. Thus, there was “an explosion of cultural affirmation” in Bolivia beginning in the early 2000s, with substantial populations reclaiming an indigenous heritage (Albó 2008).

The Cochabamba “Water War” of 2000 was a striking example of the ways indigeneity was employed for political means. When protesting the privatization of the city’s water works, citizens in Cochabamba invoked “the language of ancestry, Pachamama, and the sacredness of the land.” In other words, they evoked “iconic Indianness” (Canessa 2006:253) much as the luchadoras have done through their naming, dress, and music. The leaders and coordinators for the most part were not indigenous, but were able to incorporate the concerns of the region’s coca growers, rural Quechua speakers and Quechua on the urban periphery. As Canessa notes, in the early 1990s, regional and class affiliations in the Cochabamba region were much stronger than any sense of collective indigeneity, yet in this particular instance local citizens were able to mobilize a performance of indigeneity for political ends (Canessa 2006:248). Leaders recognized that adopting the language of indigeneity not only bolstered support of different local groups, but

also drew international press, much as the representation of indigeneity has drawn media attention to the luchadoras.

By 2002, critical attention had shifted from water to natural gas and coca under Sánchez de Lozada's second term. The focus had also shifted from Cochabamba to Tarija (where the second largest natural gas reserves in South America are located), the Chapare (the site of widespread coca leaf cultivation), and El Alto (as the epicenter for the activities of the most radical social and political parties). In 2003, controversy erupted over a proposed government contract to build a natural gas pipeline through Chile and the willingness of Sánchez de Lozada's to participate in the U.S.-led militarized anti-coca campaign. In response, protest groups mounted blockades on the roads between El Alto and La Paz, and stopped most citizens' activity in the central districts of La Paz with street demonstrations. In contrast to the "Water War," this "Gas War" of 2003 was more focused on the agenda of indigenous political groups who had successfully formed coalitions with other sectors of society (Canessa 2006:253).

In October of 2003, as the blockades persisted, Sánchez de Lozada authorized the military to take violent measures in clearing the groups from the streets. This resulted in the shootings of at least 100 people in El Alto, in addition to several deaths in La Paz. Deemed "Black October," these events effectively ended Sánchez de Lozada's government as he was forced to resign and went into exile in the United States. His vice president, Carlos Mesa Gisbert assumed the post of president and was unable to quell the expanding social movements, which as Goodale writes, "by 2004 had become disconnected from particular issues...to become a sustained mass uprising comprised of an amalgam of rural and urban political parties and groups concentrated in the altiplano and parts of the Bolivian lowlands" (2006:639).

These groups became a strong base for coca-growing *sindecato* leader Evo Morales, in his election to the presidency in 2005. Morales was particularly adept at tying together class and ethnicity in framing national political issues as “indigenous issues” (Canessa 2006, Grisaffi 2010:436) by concentrating on anxieties that were wide-spread among the Bolivia public about the effects of globalization and neoliberal economics. As Bolivia’s first president to claim indigenous roots, Morales, more commonly referred to as simply “Evo,” made a political career of performing indigeneity. He often referenced his indigeneity, strategically referring to his birth in an Aymara-speaking community or his ties to the Quechua-speaking Chapare region to which he migrated in the early 1980s. The press often reported on his speaking in both indigenous languages, but there has been some debate as to whether he speaks either at all (Albro 2005). As Canessa writes, Morales is “quite capable of romanticizing indigenous culture for his political ends” (2006:255).

Evo’s inauguration in 2006 was celebrated at Tiwanaku, a pre-Inca archaeological site, and only the next day at the Presidential Palace. In speeches at both events Evo emphasized his indigeneity by addressing his audience as “my Indian brothers and sisters from America concentrated here in Bolivia,” much as the *luchadoras* do when addressing the audience as “*amigas*.” Evo’s presidency has included vast increases in the representation of both men and women of indigenous descent in government offices, as well as a new constitution that not only guarantees rights specifically for indigenous communities, but also changed the country’s official name from *La República de Bolivia* [The Republic of Bolivia] to *El Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia* [The Plurinational State of Bolivia] in order to emphasize the autonomy of indigenous groups. In essence, after a long history of representations of indigeneity as “anachronistic,

backward and retarding the progress of the nation, ‘the indigenous’ is now increasingly seen as being iconically national” (Canessa 2006:243).

Yet, as Albro points out, there has been growing skepticism about Evo’s indigenous authenticity (2006:417). Postero notes that he has done an excellent job at using indigeneity as a backdrop for his political and economic agenda, but has done so by using an idealized vision of indigeneity, which posits all indigenous people of Bolivia as a “coherent subject that can be known and represented by him.” The reality is that Bolivia has over thirty indigenous groups with different practices, territories, histories, and languages (Postero nd:24). The tension between this idealized rhetoric and the reality of diverse indigenous populations was clear in the controversy over Morales’s support of the proposed highway through the Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro-Secure [Isiboro Secure National Park and Indigenous Territory] or TIPNIS. The area was inhabited by the Yuki, Yuracaré, and Marbán indigenous groups, as well as a number of coca farmers. The proposed Villa Tunari-San Ignacion de Moxos Highway was to provide the first direct link between Cochabamba and Beni, the two Departments that surround the park. Catalyzed by a 2011 loan from Brazil’s National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES), controversy erupted between those citing indigenous and environmental concerns and those who advocated for the economic development the highway would make available to those transporting goods for sale.

Evo wholly supported development of the highway, on the surface contradicting his image as an advocate for indigenous rights. However, as some critics point out, the highway would benefit the coca growers, allowing them to transport their product, whether for legal or illegal purposes, more efficiently. These critics suggest that Evo’s true loyalty lies with his former constituents from the coca-growers union, and his claims to indigeneity are inauthentic,



only used for political purposes when they serve him. As one Bolivian blogger wrote, “The Bolivian constitution promises that the government must consult with indigenous groups when developing their lands, but it does not promise that the government will follow their wishes” (Bloggings by Boz, 16 August, 2011).

Thus, Evo’s use of symbols of indigeneity were successful for many political aims (see Albro 2000, 2006), but he was also accused of exploiting them in ways some saw as similar to the exploitation of indigenous imagery in the past. They made reference to *indigenismo*, an intellectual and artistic movement that began in the early twentieth century, aimed at valorizing and promoting indigenous culture as part of Bolivian nationalism (Canessa 2006:244). Whereas recent indigenous movements centered around indigenous people as political and social actors, *indigenismo* promoted an ideology in which indigeneity was celebrated only as folklore, while actual indigenous people were expected to be assimilated into the mestizo national ideal (Wade 1997).

In the early twentieth century this was often accomplished through glorification of an “Inca past,” in which the former “civilization” was contrasted with the “barbarism” of the Aymara population at that time. Inca leaders and archeological sites became tropes of nationalism, modernization, and progress (Kuenzli 2010:248-249). In the middle of the twenty-first century, when the new social order of the MNR subsumed Indians within *mestizaje* by recasting them as *campesinos*, Indigenous culture became glorified, but only as folklore. Canessa writes that a new nationalism was forged through folklore festivals and the teaching of folkloric dances in schools. While class became an organizing principle and was promoted as a legitimate form of identification, race was symbolically transformed into folklore in the service of nationalism (Biggenho 2006:269). As Biggenho writes, “*Indigenismo* was a discourse in which

powerful non-indigenous subjects took a detour through the indigenous Other in order to define a national self” (2006:286). Music and dance associated with indigeneity had been in the process of transformation into “Bolivian” folklore since the 1930s, when mestizo singers began to perform stylized indigenous songs in the high-class theaters of Bolivian cities. Under different circumstances, elite classes would never have accepted these genres as entertainment (Bigenho 2006). Poole suggests that sometimes when folklore is performed exclusively for audiences, it may constitute a form of “cultural surveillance” by the dominant society (1990:122). Bigenho confirms that even as indigenous performances were seen as a source of national pride, this by no means constituted an end to racism (2006:283).

The promotion of folklore helped to make sense of the Indian past while also affirming desires for progress (Kuenzil 2010:265). Yet, as Rogers writes in reference to Bolivian festivals that incorporate dances from traditional fiestas, the performance of folklore as “indigeneity” preserves the association between these forms and indigenous or peasant subalterity, while they “problematize the very notions of authenticity and tradition that enable their success” (1999:4).

### Performing Authentic Indigeneity

Given this history of indigenismo and particularly, the more recent controversy surrounding TIPNIS, what were considered “authentic” representations of indigeneity were often contested in Bolivian society. Audience reactions to the luchadoras often differed, some seeing the very visibility of indigenous characters as a form of disidentification in which minority subjects like the luchadoras challenge hegemonic notions of normative citizenship (Muñoz 1999:4). Yet other audience members illigitimized their claims, and felt that their portrayals constituted a new form of indigenismo in which they superficially exploited symbols of indigeneity.

The luchadoras used strategies of adequation and authentication to try to elicit “authorization” from both local and foreign audiences (Bucholtz and Hall 2005:603). Bucholtz and Hall explain that authorization relies on the affirmation of a way of identifying through institutions or ideology, on a local or broader level (or an imposition in cases such as the Spanish colonial term “Indian” or MNR’s creation of “campesinos”). Its counterpart illegitimation refers to the ways identities may be dismissed (as in the case of skepticism about Evo’s authenticity as indigenous), censored (such as MNR government’s erasure of Indians), or ignored by those same structures (2005:603).

“Authenticity” is a term with particular resonance in discussions of indigenous peoples because it is often understood to variously reference aspects of originality (Olsen 2002), longevity (Shepard 2002:193), and cultural continuity (Hervik 1999:166), particularly when a group is “remote,” “isolated,” “distinct” (Hervik 1999:177), or “unspoiled, genuine, pristine, untouched and traditional” (Handler 1986:2). But authenticity is a culturally relative category that is “constantly created and reinvented in social processes” by individual and group actors (Olsen 2002:163). It is not “an inherent feature of objects or relations” but a “value” in peoples’ world views (Olsen 2002:161). Thus, a confluence exists between the ways indigenous people may be evaluated as “authentic” and the strategy of “authentication” that Bucholtz and Hall describe (2005:601). They describe their notion of authentication as the act of referencing what counts as “genuine” for a given purpose, such as the evidence a speaker uses to claim their right to tell a certain story (2004:602).

Many Paceños do authorize the performances of the luchadoras as cholitas. For example, David, a local LGBT activist told me, that the cholitas luchadoras are “un orgullo Paceño en La Paz y El Alto. Es una pasión de multitudes...la gente burguesa y popular” [A Paceño pride in La

Paz and El Alto. It's a passion of multitudes for the elite and popular classes]. And certainly the media outlets that publish front-page stories about the luchadoras in both English and Spanish authorize the women as legitimate examples of indigeneity through their framing of the articles. One Paceña filmmaker described to me a commercial film shoot in which she had hired some of the luchadoras to act as cholas, while they were suspended from a high ceiling as if they were flying. She described them as difficult to work with, but explained "They are the only ones who would do it. And you can't just dress anyone up like a cholita, you know?" The luchadoras, who have dark hair, dark skin, short stature, and Aymara features fit the bill.

Yet, with the history of indigenismo in Bolivia, it is easy to see how some locals deemed their performances of indigeneity in the context of lucha libre illegitimate. A number of older Paceños suggested that the cholitas luchadoras acted in ways that lacked respect for the history of the chola and Aymara women. One Alteño man in his mid-twenties that I met at a LIDER event did not like the way they used symbolism of indigeneity. "No me agradan mucho [las luchadoras] porque me parece una falta de respeto a la mujer Boliviana" [I don't like the luchadoras much because to me they seem like a lack of respect to Bolivian women]. Similarly, Carmen Rosa pointed out to a reporter from The National newspaper that some older audience members asked the luchadoras "Oh, why are indigenous women doing these things? How ugly" (Clifford 2009). As some audience members explained to me, they enjoyed lucha libre but thought that because the women were mixing representations of indigeneity with burlesque-like performances they were doing a disservice to indigenous women.

While these responses do not represent the majority of spectators' reactions to the cholitas luchadoras, they echo some audience interpretations of another characterization of an indigenous woman popular throughout Latin America: La India María. La India María was a

character that María Elena Velasco developed for Mexican television and film that later spread throughout the Americas. In the program, Velasco portrays the character María, who is based on the Mazahua women who migrated to Mexico City in the 1960s. The character of India María has been criticized for portraying indigenous women as naïve, clumsy, and overwhelmed by “modern” life. She is illiterate and speaks broken Spanish (Roher 2008).

Many times when explaining my project in both Bolivia and the United States I was asked whether the cholitas luchadoras performed similarly to Velasco’s character. With her indigenous Mexican clothing, the character very much resembled the style of cholitas, and her form of comedy has shared qualities with the ways cholitas luchadoras perform in the ring. Her humor is described as using a stereotype “focusing on character traits, performance, dialogues, and embodiment” (Rohrer 2009:54), and much of her comedy relied on physical humor and over-acted facial expressions.

These similarities are visually apparent and La India María may have even been the inspiration for the cholitas luchadoras. Most often, people refer to Juan Mamani, proprietor of Titanes del Ring, as the originator of the idea to have women wrestle in polleras. However, this narrative is contested, with several of the luchadoras who worked for Titanes del Ring taking credit for the idea. But Kid Simonini from LIDER had the most elaborate story about how he came up with the idea for the cholitas luchadoras. He told me that at one time he had been a DVD vendor in El Alto. In the early 2000s, some of his most popular items for sale were DVDs of La India María films. One day, Simonini put on one of the videos—*El que no corre... vuela* [That which doesn’t run...flies]—while vending, and watched as María fought in a lucha libre match. As a long-time wrestler himself, he was intrigued. He told me María looked very similar

to the cholitas vending candy next to his stall and he had the idea to begin training women to wrestle wearing the pollera.

Rohrer references the assessment of Carlos Monsiváis that the foolish indigenous character is a legacy of Mexican teatro frívolo, well known for racist humor (Rohrer 2008:63, see also Fregoso & Iglesias 1998). Among film critics the character is often condemned for being ethnically discriminating (Ricalde and Vilalobos 2004:196). Often, race-based humor is seen as simply an expression of racism (Means and Coleman 2000:8), but as Atluri points out, such readings may assume an essential racial identification outside of the representations (2009:198). Instead, following Hall (1997) she suggests that language, and particularly comedic discourse make alternative subjectivities possible. Rohrer points out that many Mexicans and Latinos in the United States feel *India María* films address themes of alienation, displacement, the urban/rural gap, development and modernity, corruption, class, and repression that they could relate to in their lives (2008). “*La India María*’s performance is marked as burlesque, and the dialogue pointing out injustice in very simple words, both contribute to a counter-reading or ‘ironic reading’ of the stereotype...At the same time her exaggerated performance and use of the body create a distance to real experience and clearly reveal her as a mediated construction” (2008:63).

But most of these fans to which Rohrer refers are urban Mexicans or immigrants to the United States, rather than people who occupy similar subjectivities to the one Velasco performs as *La India María*. The possibility remains that indigenous women may interpret these foolish performances associated with rurality, indigeneity, and women as offensive. But there is one important difference between *La India María*’s and the cholitas luchadoras’ performances of indigeneity: the luchadoras are women who have claims to indigeneity that within the context are authorized by the local audience of indigenous identified spectators. Though Atluri points out in

her writing on Sasha Baron Cohen's character Ali G, that humorous portrayals of characters where race is emphasized may trouble prevailing discourses through mockery, Desmond contends that the performance of essentialized identities by those who are essentialized often reinforces the naturalization of difference (1999). In the context of indigenismo, then, it is clear why audiences members had differing opinions. While the luchadoras did claim identification as indigenous, Aymara, or simply as cholas, they used this as a form of strategic essentialism particularly in representations aimed at audiences outside of Bolivia.

### Más Indígena

The essentialized symbolism the luchadoras used created an international media sensation. But these performances of authenticity were not equally available to male luchadores. As many scholars of the Andes have written, "women are [considered] more Indian" than men (de la Cadena 1995). Stephenson suggests racial differences are more visibly marked on women than men, through their clothing, hair, language use, and occupation of public or private space (1999:4). Further, their work options and the fact that they usually remain in their local villages while men seek work in urban areas position them as the less "modern" or "globalized" gender. These assumptions are reinforced by the ways women have often been treated in scholarly literature. "The Andean woman is the privileged repository of cultural resistance. In her weaving activities as well as in her specialized ritualistic role, the woman actively produces symbols and interpretations that form an important part of the collective identity of the Andean communities" (Rivera Cusicanqui 1990:179). Women are often the most visible representations of Indianness, and thus experience racial classifications in different ways than men (Zorn 2004:165).

Indeed, Bigenho's examination of Bolivian Fantasy notes that women were central to the deployment of folklore as tradition (2007). Because the indigenous Other during this time was

most often represented by women rather than men, notions of folklore and tradition became more closely associated with women. More recently, Albro has written on the way *mujeres de pollera* have been used by male Bolivian politicians to claim authenticity within the community. In Quillacollo, these politicians seek endorsement by or make public appearances with *mujeres de pollera* in order to suggest that they too are from “humble origins” (2000:32). Significantly, Albro points out that this politicization is not unconnected to ideas of tradition and nation. He suggests the cultural capital of *mujeres de pollera* is not just about women’s power but relies on the association of the *pollera* with the local, and a “folkloric idiom.” He writes, “in the words of local men, she ‘represents the human being in this place,’ ‘the nucleus of the family and of society,’ and ‘the process of consolidating our cultural roots’” (2000:45).

Perhaps then it is not surprising that while the *cholitas luchadoras* explicitly performed indigeneity, the men did not, despite the fact that they were similarly positioned in terms of their indigenous heritage. They too were the sons or grandsons of people from indigenous communities who moved to the La Paz area from smaller pueblos in the department during massive migrations to urban areas that stretched from the 1950s into the 2000s. Yet the men rarely identified as indigenous explicitly, to me or in other public settings I witnessed.

One exception however, occurred when I spent Carnaval 2012 in Oruro with Roberto. We bought an “all inclusive” ticket aimed at local students from a tour company, which included round trip bus transportation from La Paz to Oruro and 2 nights accommodation (sleeping on a hardwood floor in a freezing building that reeked of polyurethane). As we departed La Paz on Friday afternoon, the tour organizer took roll on the bus, and gave a short lecture about the importance of the history and traditions of Carnival, particularly in Oruro, where it has been declared one of UNESCO’s Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. He



then noted the several foreigners who were joining Bolivians on the bus: a group of 5 young men from Chile, a woman and man in their mid-twenties from Lima, and myself and Roberto from the United States. Roberto found it endlessly hilarious that he had been included as from the United States, and we joked about it all weekend.

Our jokes eventually turned into a discussion of my family heritage, and I told him I had ancestry in England, Poland, and Germany. “Ahhh, sí. Pareces alemana o holandesa. Ahora entiendo porque!” [Ah, yes. You look German or Dutch. Now I understand why!]. Then I asked him where his family was from originally and he explained that his parents both grew up in a small town near Lake Titicaca. Before he or any of his brothers were born, his parents decided to move to El Alto and his father opened a car mechanic shop. Perhaps it was in the spirit of Carnaval—which was originally an indigenous festival, and now involves hundreds of dance troupes which perform dances that date back to the time of colonization (though certainly have evolved since then)—but he finally finished. “Por eso soy indígena” [So I am indigenous].

Though Edgar never called himself indigenous, he subtly performed identification with indigenous symbolism on occasion. When we trained, he often wore a black t-shirt that displayed in bold, white writing “Taliban Indígena.” Confused, I asked him about it the first time he wore it. He told me that it was just a t-shirt worn by a group of wrestlers who practice in El Alto. Though he wasn’t specifically part of the group (and did not live in El Alto), he wore the shirt as a sign of support. Still unclear, I began to search for more references to “talibanes indígenas” and found some online news articles about the group. According to Univisión news (2006), they were formed in 2006 to defend the “dignidad” [dignity] of El Alto and the nation of Bolivia in the context of political movements for autonomy and succession in the Eastern Lowlands. More recently, Swinehart (2012:87) has described them as “urban Aymaras who take on ‘Taliban’ as

an emblem of anti-imperialist, ‘tough guy’ footing.” In essence, Edgar’s wearing of the shirt was an enactment of pride in a strong, tough, Aymara heritage.

Notably, while Roberto and Edgar claimed elements of indigenous identification at times, they made no attempt to highlight indigeneity in the ring. The men wore spandex body suits and masks like Mexican wrestlers, but even if they were to dress as “indigenous,” audiences likely would not have read their portrayals as equally authentic as those of the cholitas luchadoras. Situated formations of racial performance and even identification function differently for men and women, depending partially on ideological notions of gender, and partially on historical realities of daily life. Men more easily “become” mestizo by migrating to an urban area, while indigenous women usually have a harder time leaving the communities of their upbringing, and thus their ethnic mobility usually relies on marriage (de la Cadena 1995:332). Indian men “contribute to the nation” through wage labor or military service, while Indian women are seen as outside the formal nation (Seligman 2001). De la Cadena writes, “Mestizo male migrants are most strategically positioned to exploit their knowledge, experience, and contacts in the city, while peasant women remain behind in the village—the last link in the chain of power, and the most ‘Indian’ of all” (1995:338).

### Reworking the Cholita

As Canessa points out, women are not considered more Indian simply because they do not conform to hegemonic ideals. Rather it is that national ideals of progress are constructed in contrast to the rural, the Indian, and the feminine (2005:17). Yet, the luchadoras of La Paz offer a counter example in which the very indigenous authenticity that the women are able to perform became central to their ability to access increased forms of cosmopolitanism and mobility that their male counterparts were able to gain. The cholitas luchadoras used their very ability to

perform authenticity as indigenous women to give them access to the world far beyond “the village.”

In a globalized world, where intensified flows of commodities and ideas have led to an increase in “cultural traffic” (Appadurai 1996:28-38) local authenticity is usually understood as contrasting with global phenomena. Given the globally reproduced nature of *lucha libre*, it is particularly surprising that the *luchadoras* have been able to balance their performances of indigeneity with increased cosmopolitanism. Their claims to cosmopolitanism are a direct result of their locally authorized identification. As Canessa ponders, if globalization is the extension of global capital that homogenizes cultures, “then what could be more anti-global than an indigenous identity?” (2006:252). But he concludes that the dichotomy is more problematic than it might seem on the surface, with increasing flows of information and expansion of networks globalization often allows for identification with indigeneity to proliferate (2006:253, see also Jacobs 1996:36).

As Boelstorff points out, different trajectories of globalization are not always in agreement and rarely have absolute dominance (2005:226). While the *cholitas luchadoras* have strategically performed indigeneity, emphasizing their identification with a local indigenous community, these same performances have contributed to their popularity with foreign audiences.

While Agamben, drawing on Benjamin (1979), writes that quotation of cultural forms “alienate by force a fragment of the past...mak[ing] it lose its authentic power” (1999:104), the *cholitas luchadoras* have gone beyond quotation. Within conditions of globalization, they have reworked *lucha libre* in a way that shares much in common with Boelstorff’s notion of “dubbing” culture (2003:237). As Leap (2003, 2010) and Pavis (1996, see also Bharucha

1997:32) point out, processes of creative reworking are not only aimed at performance, but often are in the service of claiming identities or certain forms of social capital. The success of the cholitas luchadoras' form of strategic essentialism has become a component of the frustration male luchadores feel.

One night at a LIDER event a Paceño man in his thirties told me “Las cholitas son nuestro unico y verdadero aporte a este deporte” [The cholitas are our only true contribution to this sport]. This fan attributes a different form of authenticity to the luchadoras—one based on originality. So while many male luchadores worked towards a form of authenticity in conforming to international standards and practices of lucha libre, the cholitas luchadoras, for the most part achieved both originality and authenticity as indigenous women. Though the performance of indigeneity was not the essence of what the Super Catch luchadores considered clowning, it was the aspect of the performances of cholitas luchadoras that gave them widespread visibility. Thus it contributed to increased circulation of “clownish” representations which the men feel gives Bolivian lucha libre in general a bad reputation on an international level. They did not see the cholitas luchadoras the way some fans did.

## CHAPTER 5

### GLOBAL CHOLAS: THE PERFORMED ARTS OF TOURISM AND COSMOPOLITANISM

My website pictures of the cholitas luchadoras caused a minor scandal with Edgar and Anarkista, but their overall impact was minimal. Images of the cholitas luchadoras were already circulating heavily in international media that garnered far more readership than my online photo account. Before I had ever seen the luchadoras perform live, they had been featured in a 14-page National Geographic photo spread and article (Guillermoprieto 2008), a piece in The Guardian accompanied by a video in the online version (Schipani 2008), as a challenge in U.S. television program The Amazing Race (2008, Season 13, Leg 3), in three foreign-produced documentary films (*The Fighting Cholitas*, Jobrani 2007; *Mamachas del Ring*, Park 2009; *Cholita Libre*, Holz and Reichter 2009), and in countless newspaper articles throughout South America. In 2011 a picture of Carmen Rosa wrestling Julia la Paceña was featured among the World Press Photo Contest finalists.

The cholitas luchadoras have attracted this kind of attention in part because many people consider them to be “original”—something that can’t be found in wrestling in other countries. When I asked one Paceño spectator if he thought the cholitas luchadoras were creative characters, he responded “Obviamente es nuestro aporte al mundo del pancracio” [Obviously it’s our contribution to the world of wrestling]. While some of the cholitas luchadoras relied on humorous gimmicks and “clowning,” some were also very skilled in agile wrestling. But their levels of skill seemed to have very little correlation with their international success. Instead, the spectacle of indigenous women, in indigenous clothing, taking on men in the ring caught people’s attention.

Every news article I have read about the luchadoras in foreign press draws attention to their indigeneity. Juan Forrero's 2005 New York Times article about the cholitas luchadoras titled "In this Corner, in the Flouncy Skirt and Bowler Hat..." begins with the description: "In her red multilayered skirt, white pumps and gold-laced shawl, the traditional dress of the Aymara people, Ana Polonia Choque might well be preparing for a night of folk dancing or, perhaps, a religious festival." He goes on to describe the matches in detail and then discusses the opposition the luchadoras faced as women entering a masculine activity. Similarly, Alma Guillermoprieto mentions the women's attire early in her National Geographic article (2008):

Like many of the women of Aymara descent in the audience, Yolanda and Claudina are dressed to the nines in the traditional fashion of the Andean highlands: shiny skirts over layers of petticoats, embroidered shawls pinned with filigreed jewelry, bowler hats. Their costumes glisten in the spotlights while they make a regal progress around the bleachers, greeting their public with the genteel smiles of princesses, twirling and waving gracefully until the music stops.

While these two articles focus on their clothing as a marker of indigeneity, others sensationalize indigenous women as a marginalized part of Bolivian society, who are showing their strength through wrestling performances. Carroll and Schipani write in the Guardian (2008),

Welcome to lucha libre, freestyle wrestling with a Bolivian twist. This macho sport in this macho country, South America's most impoverished and conservative, has been flipped into an unlikely feminist phenomenon. Indigenous women known as cholitas, physically strong from manual labour but long considered powerless and subservient, have become stars of the ring. They train like men, fight like men—and beat men.

These accounts give central importance to the luchadoras' appearances and subject positions as indigenous women. Though the fact that they were wrestling was important to the stories, their relative abilities were not described in detail except when authors mention the ways their movements send the polleras "flying through the air in a swirl of colors" (Forero 2005). The luchadoras' relative celebrity came not as a result of their moves (and sometimes in spite of them), but through the ways they portrayed themselves as indigenous women. Early on, they

recognized the appeal of traditional imagery in their performances. Highlighting indigeneity helped increase business in a number of ways: it enchanted local audiences, attracted foreign tourists, and further broadened their audience internationally through media attention.

### Representing the Chola for Tourists

On a small scale, representing the chola has increased revenue. Titanes del Ring, which had the most success in attracting foreign audiences usually had about 500 spectators in total, 150-200 of which were foreigners. Foreign audience members are especially important because at both groups' events, they pay 80 Bolivianos (about US\$12) for entrance while locals pay only the equivalent of 15 Bolivianos (about US\$2). Veteran wrestler and trainer Ben Simonini, highlighted for me the economic importance of foreigners to the wrestling business in Bolivia when he told me "Bien tener turistas...porque vienen con plata no es la pena...Aca en La Paz por ejemplo, es una forma de economía...A los finales el señor está hurgando. Están hurgando mis compañeros de trabajo también. Aunque hacerlo no es una profesión. Por ejemplo las cholitas que entrenaba atraen americanos. atraen extranjeros....Que más puedo decir?" [Its good to have tourists...because they come with money. Because they come with money, its not a pain...Here in La Paz, for example, it's a form of economy... in the end the guy is digging [for money]. My coworkers are also digging. Even though it's not a profession, to do this. It could be much better. For example the cholitas that train attract Americans. They attract Americans, they attract foreigners...What more can I say?]. Luchadoras in Titanes del Ring usually earned the equivalent of \$20-40 per event; about three to six times that of the Super Catch luchadores.

Much of Titanes del Ring's success with foreigners was a result of the partnering with the tour company, Andean Secrets. The company was started in 2007 by Daniela, a Paceña woman in her mid-thirties, and employed about ten "guides." Though the company began by offering

tours to some outdoor scenic attractions, their profits now primarily come from lucha libre tourism. Daniela told me that the company originally focused on tours to mountains near La Paz, but when she discovered lucha libre (“yo descubierta esto”) she began promoting it internationally because it was a “espectáculo pequeño y local” [small and local spectacle]. In fact, like many of the luchadoras and trainers, Daniela took credit for creating the sensation. One day when I was in the company office, a young British man stopped in the office to ask directions. Before telling him how to get to the shop he was looking for, she asked “Have you seen my show?” When he left, she explained to me “Nos creamos las Cholitas Wrestling... Totalmente es un producto bien traducido dentro del Mercado” [We created ‘Cholitas Wrestling.’ ...It is positively a good product that has been translated into the market].

On Sunday afternoons, the clients board large busses outside of twelve participating hostels. The trip from La Paz to El Alto takes forty minutes, climbing the steep streets from 3,050 meters (10,000 feet) in the center of the city to almost 4,300 meters (14,000 feet). As the busses arrive on the rim of the altiplano in El Alto, travelers are treated to spectacular views of the city in the valley below. Not to let this vista go unnoticed, the bus stops at a lookout point to allow the riders a photo opportunity. After the travelers re-board the bus, the trip continues to la Ceja, a large market area in El Alto, where the Multifuncional arena is located. Once inside, clients are given popcorn and soda, and escorted to the plastic deck chairs that are set up nearest to the ring. This gives them the best views of the performers as they wrestle inside the ropes, outside of the ring, and sometimes among the audience.

Carlos, the self-appointed public relations manager for LIDER also recognized the influence Andean Secrets has had over wrestling in La Paz, and specifically the ability of the tourism company to generate profits. When Carlos and I first met in 2009, he asked me a number



of questions about the prices Andean Secrets charged and the services they offered. In 2011, he was more straightforward asking specifically what I thought he could do to generate an international audience for LIDER. I told him Andean Secrets was able to get so many clients because they provide transportation, but more importantly because they advertise effectively. By the time I returned to La Paz in 2012, relations between LIDER and Carlos had become strained. When I asked Juanita where Carlos had disappeared to she told me that he had been selling pictures of the luchadoras online without their consent, and when she, Benita, and Dina discovered this they shamed him into leaving the company. But Juanita and Benita had picked up where he left off. Every Saturday and Sunday they walked around the main tourist streets in central La Paz, handing out flyers for their Sunday afternoon shows to tourists. They had also begun picking up tourists at their hostels and hotels to transport them to the 12 de Octubre arena in El Alto much as I had suggested to Carlos the year before.

Juanita specifically asked if I would join them in handing out flyers to tourists because they might trust me more as a gringa, and if they had questions I might be able to explain in English. On weekend afternoons, we would walk with our fliers around Plaza San Francisco concentrating on Calle Sagarnaga and Calle Illampu, where hundreds of vendors sell alpaca sweaters (really, any clothing item you can think of made from alpaca), leather purses, silver jewelry, and charrangos (Bolivian stringed instruments) primarily to tourists. Juanita would approach customers and if they had questions about the event I would answer. “Tienen más confianza con alguien que habla ingles” [They have more trust in someone that speaks English] she explained.

Juanita also hoped that when I rode the bus with them to the arena, I might be able to give a brief lecture on “La Chola Paceña” to the clients. “Eres antropóloga. Puedes explicar” [You’re

an anthropologist. You can explain], she told me. When I asked her what I should explain, she told me to emphasize that cholas are “mujeres reales” [real women], not just wrestlers. She also suggest I give detailed information about the significance of the hat, braids, and pleats of in the skirt (most of which I didn’t know before she explained it to me). Rather than positioning the wrestling as cosmopolitan, Juanita played on the cosmopolitan desires of tourists for “local” experiences. She instructed me to mention that I am an anthropologist, serving to grant me authority to speak on the Chola Paceña and polleras, but also giving them an air of exotic authenticity. For the tourists, an anthropologist represented someone concerned with the globally rare and culturally authentic.

#### (Mis)Understanding the Chola

I appreciated Juanita’s invitation, because it was very clear many of the tourists had no idea what a “chola” was. For example, before a Titanes del Ring event in 2009, I asked William, a British student in his early 20s, if he knew what a “cholita” was. He responded by asking me “Isn’t it just a Bolivian woman? I think it just [means] Bolivian woman, but I’m not sure.” Though the specific definition of “chola” or “cholita” was not readily available or articulable to some audience members, many associated them with notions of iconic traditional Bolivian women. One woman explained to her companion that “cholas” were like the women on postcards for sale in the tourist market stalls, and while on the Andean Secrets bus in 2011, a *mujer de pollera* walked by the window carrying her wares wrapped in a *manta* shawl on her back. The Welsh woman behind me exclaimed, “Oh, that’s what a ‘chola’ is, right?” Certainly, many locals would have described the woman walking past the bus as a “chola” as well. But other foreigners made the connection they saw between cholas and tradition more explicit. William’s friend Jack told me “I can [understand] women wrestlers fighting in like, a circle over

some sort of argument...an issue in the community—to be resolved—between the community. And they do it via wrestling. Via a fight basically, but I couldn't think of any reason you'd do it in [lucha libre] style.” Jack connects cholas to a sense of “community” and traditional ways of settling an argument.

Other travelers had slightly more insight into what cholas represented in the local context. Anne, a young woman from the United States, suggested that they might be associated with Bolivian feminism. We sat next to each other one Sunday in the Multifuncional, and when the anarchist feminist organization Mujeres Creando came up in conversation, she asked, “Are they the ones that wear the big skirts? Because they're Bolivian? Because they're feminist?” But even in her statements, the idea of the *mujer de pollera* as the quintessential Bolivian woman remained ingrained. When she complimented the beauty of some *polleras* she suggested that I could buy one and wear it for Halloween. “You could get [a *pollera*] and one of those little bowler hats and a shawl and go as a Bolivian!” For her, like many other travelers, indigeneity remained more a symbolic token than lived experience just as it had been conceptualized under ideologies of *indigenismo*.

Despite their lack of prior knowledge, when I explained “La Chola Paceña” on the bus at Juanita's request, most tourists paid attention and seemed excited to learn. Most of the travelers who attend *Titanes del Ring* events are similar to the “lonely planeters” described by Notar (2008). They are backpackers or independent vacationers traveling for as brief a time as a few months or as long as several years. In La Paz, most are young, middle-class citizens of “developed” countries like Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Holland, Germany, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa who travel through several different countries, if not continents. Most travel on somewhat limited budgets, and thus, spend about \$10 per night to

share a dormitory-like room in a backpackers' hostel or slightly more for a private room in a small hotel. Most were college students, young adults taking extended vacations, or "gap years" who were taking a year to travel between high school and beginning university. Some stayed in each city for several weeks or even months learning a new language, volunteering with local charities, or taking short-term jobs at a hostel.

Though they do not have the extensive economic resources or elite class status often associated with cosmopolitanism, the travelers' mode of orientation to the world (Hannerz 1990) and competencies for interacting with other cultures (Friedman 1994) may be seen as a particular form of cosmopolitanism. Indeed, in some ways they are emblematic cosmopolitan figures; they are mobile individuals who enjoy encounters with difference and are willing to accept risk, but are always "just passing through" (Molz 2006:5). Szerszynski and Urry (2002) suggest additionally that cosmopolitanism is formed through curiosity about places and people, reflecting upon differences between places, and an appreciation of different cultures.

Travelers arrive hoping to view traditional Bolivians they recognize from the countless postcards available throughout the Andean region's large cities. Bauer illustrates the tourists' desire for an authentic local in writing on erotic tourism in Cuzco, Peru, where local men attract foreign women by becoming "Professional Incas" with "long black hair, darker skin, indigenous features, sometimes wearing ponchos and woven belts or headbands" (2008:613). The chola fulfills another sort of desire for experience of exotic locals. Tourists, whether engaging in romantic exploits or watching performative entertainment, are looking for what they understand as an exotic experience of traditional Andean culture.

Some tourists' desires to experience a "different culture" made cholitas luchadoras events a highlight. Particularly, the ways the Andean Secrets tour company advertised made the events

attractive. Though I was already very familiar with Bolivian lucha libre the first time I rode the Andean Secrets bus, few travelers had heard of the attraction before arriving in La Paz. Lonely Planet has mentioned them in their Bolivia guidebook since 2007, but none of the travelers I spoke with told me they had seen the listing. Instead, most noticed posters in their hostels or in tour company offices while inquiring about other offers.

The poster that Andean Secrets produces to advertise Titanes del Ring events could be found around central La Paz in most hostels, some affiliated tour companies, and several restaurants that catered to tourists. I first saw it behind the registration desk of the Ekko hostel where a friend of mine worked as a receptionist. The full-color poster announced in English “Unique!!! Cholitas Wrestling. Only in Bolivia. Unboliviable. Every Sunday at: 16:00-20:00. In: Multifuncional El Alto city (Ceja Area).” The poster contained websites, information about purchasing tickets through the travel company, maps to the Andean Secrets office and the arena, pricing information, and contact phone numbers. I also saw handbill flyers (Figure x) in the same design available for hostel and restaurant patrons to take with them. These had the same information in Spanish on the reverse side.

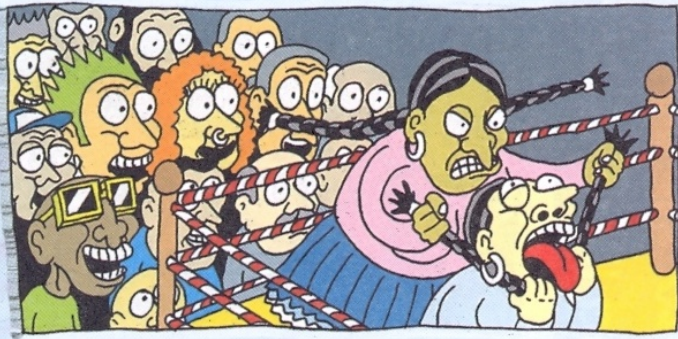
While the advertisements used sensationalist language, it was the cartoon graphic that particularly struck me. The cartoon plays on gendered and racialized exoticism to attract foreign audiences to a “unique[ly]” Bolivian or “unboliviable” experience. The cartoons of the women wrestling reflect common stereotypes of indigenous women. Even a cursory perusal of the drawing reveals that the skin tones of the wrestlers visibly differ from the skin tones of the audience members in the audience. Further, the women’s noses and breasts are exaggerated in size. The picture clearly portrays the pollera, and both women wear double braids, which become the focus of the picture. As one woman strangles the other with her black braided hair, she makes

a menacing grimace while the one being strangled sticks out her bright red tongue, seemingly to gasp for air. This cartoon, reproduced on posters, flyers, stickers, and even on the tags of lucha libre masks available for sale from the tour company, represents the luchadoras as cholas that symbolize the most superficial understanding of indigenous Bolivians.

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Figure 19. Andean Secrets Publicity Flyer.



Figure 20. Titanes del Ring Spanish Language Flyer from 2009

The contrast between these flyers, and other advertisements for Titanes del Ring are striking. All around La Ceja market, where the Multifuncional was located, I noticed legal paper sized announcements about the next week's events, and often while walking through the market I was given handheld flyers as well. These advertisements were markedly different from those found in the center of La Paz at tourist locations. These were in Spanish, and were usually printed either in black and white, or a single color. The one example I display here (Figure y) is simply headed by "Titanes del Ring y Las Cholitas Cachascanistas." Below are several headshots of the wrestlers captioned by their names, and along the bottom is written the date and time of

the next event. Other Spanish language flyers followed a very similar form. They are headed by titles such as “Por 1ra. Vez toda la selección de los mejores luchadores de Bolivia” [For the first time the whole selection of the best wrestlers in Bolivia], or “Los idolos de la lucha libre junto a las Cholas Cachascanistas” [The Idols of Lucha Libre together with the Wrestling Cholitas], and displayed headshots with the wrestlers’ names. One flyer also included photos of women actually wrestling in the ring. Most included the time and place of specific events.

The differences between advertisements suggests that two very different groups are being addressed as potential audience members. The flyers written in Spanish are passed out to locals near the arena in El Alto. These flyers assume a level of knowledge about the wrestling performances: little explanation is needed—only the place and time of the event. In some instances the flyers do not even include the location. Conversely, the English language publicity materials have a wealth of information: time, place, price, directions, and contact numbers for the tour company. But more importantly, the differences between the pictures on these two types of advertisements are striking. The Spanish language flyers portray specific wrestlers, and contain both men and women. They seem to be aimed toward people who are familiar with the wrestlers and may be interested in seeing a specific character perform.

The cartoon graphic on the English posters and flyers clearly exoticizes the events. By portraying women who wear polleras, leaving absent the male luchadores who typically wear spandex costumes, they allude to conceptions tradition and Otherness. Seward suggests that cartoon representations of racial stereotypes are appealing because “stereotypes define and package reality into convenient and manageable perceptions” (1985:22). The cartoons play up the luchadoras’ bodily capital associated with indigeneity to a ridiculous extent. The cholas of the cartoon are iconic in the sense that they represent the hyperreal Indian (Ramos 1998), a



“simulacrum”—substituting signs of the real for the real itself (Baudrillard 1983:4). Alneng calls these types of imaginaries within tourist encounters “touristic phantasms” (2002: 465-466), in which the characters eschew nostalgia for authentic local people, and focus primarily on difference as something to be accumulated. The exoticism within these phantasms is based on a human tendency to build value around relations of similarity and difference (Taussig 1993). Rather than offering tourists an experience of “real Bolivian culture,” the cartoon emphasizes difference. The flyers communicate that the even may not be a site of learning about Bolivian traditions, but it will certainly be “UnBolivable.”

The flyers reflected the way the luchadoras and Andean Secrets thought the events would sell. Daniela from Andean Secrets told me: “Es algo muy auténtico. Es un mezcla entre la lucha libre que es muy popular en el nivel internacional, pero tiene una caracterista muy Boliviana” [Its something really authentic. It’s a mix of lucha libre that is very popular on the international level, but has a very Bolivian characteristic].

### Touristic Expectations

Daniela seemed to be right about the effectiveness of advertising. Andean Secrets was a booming business and advertised a product that got many tourists excited. While waiting for the Andean Secrets bus to pick me up at a local hostel, I often heard backpackers discussing what they expected from the shows. Many had heard from other young tourists that there would be fireworks, “midget tossing,” and “women on women action” as part of the show. I also heard tourists boarding a bus to a wrestling match joke about combining Peruvian and Bolivian “cultural” experiences; they envisioned holding a rave at Machu Picchu that featured midget wrestling and strobe lights. These comments, along with those suggesting the show might be “brutal,” “disturbingly real,” or “crazy” reveal the ways that some travelers are searching for

something understandable, yet beyond the bounds of what can be found in travel locations closer to home.

In *The Tourist*, MacCannell defines tourist attractions as the relationship between a sight, its marker, and those who attend (1989:41). As the success of these posters make clear, audience members, actors, and publicity play equally pivotal roles in the meanings of performance. These meanings emerge not simply from the action, but as products of an interactive process in which the audience is an active participant (Goodwin 1986:284). Audience members make sense of the performance by linking it to a broader context (Duranti 1986:243-244). Thus, understanding cholas as symbols of tradition and the Bolivian nation is combined with sensationalized advertising to create a sense of adventure and exoticism for tourists.

Though Hymes (1981:82) would suggest that only members of a community with access to folk knowledge could truly understand such a performance, even travelers with little background are part of the interactive process. Performance, like other aesthetic modes, is a key site in which difference is transformed into discourse through which the audience makes meaning (Marcus and Myers 1995:34). The way audiences understand the characters and action of lucha libre depends heavily on their understanding of the stories and characters referenced in theatrical aspects of the events.

In suiting themselves to this image, the luchadoras use a mode of display called “staged authenticity” (MacCannell 1989:91) in which their names and clothing function as both signs and signifiers of their own identities. At times, the performed representations become understood as more real than the living beings that perform as (Desmond 1999). In essence, performers, particularly of cultural dramas that audiences perceive as “authentic,” often become both signifier and sign of themselves. The Cholitas Luchadoras then represent both the average

indigenous woman as well as the idealized icon of the chola. In this conflation, they contribute to the widely circulating icon of the chola that has been divorced from the reality of indigenous marketwomen, and now exists primarily as an imaginary referent, and conform to touristic expectations.

But their expectations were not always met. While local audiences did not see *lucha libre* as antithetical to authentic indigeneity, tourists often did. Exhibition wrestling is something that most young people privileged enough to travel for pleasure have been exposed to on television. In fact, the 2006 film, *Nacho Libre* starring Jack Black was a popular point of reference for many Andean Secrets clients. Indeed, even Andean Secrets's posters and flyers portrayed a "gringo" audience. Much literature on tourism focuses on the notion of "authenticity," or a sense of naturalness in the local community, and the desire of tourists to see "life as it is really lived" (MacCannell 1989:3,94). MacCannell (1989:101), drawing on Goffman (1959) explains that authenticity is in part dependent on an illusion of the entry into a "back" area, when in reality the entry is only into a front region set up for tourists to visit. Cholita wrestling does not maintain its sense of being "backstage" for long. The poster even presents it as specifically for tourists: the cartoon depicts a light skinned man with green hair, another light skinned man wearing a baseball cap, a woman with a nose ring, and a Black man in yellow sunglasses—clearly all representing tourists watching the show. Once spectators begin to watch, they see that it is quite obviously a scripted spectacle and further, clearly resembles the exhibition wrestling of the United States most travelers have seen numerous times on television. No matter what travelers expect on the bus ride, once the show starts they discover "its far too WWF" to be authentic. Some travelers expressed to me that they felt disappointment when they realized *lucha libre* is much like professional wrestling in other countries, rather than a traditional Bolivian pastime.

When I asked Lorenzo, the weekend manager of Ekko's registration desk if he liked the lucha libre events, he told me "The show is shit, but its something to do. It's Sunday afternoon. You might as well go."

Lorenzo was apathetic, but some tourists felt affronted when they realized the shows were not "traditional." Some left the event early, paying for a taxi back to the center of the city, while others just grumbled to their friends. Though advertising played on notions of local exoticism, the globalized nature of lucha libre became all too apparent within the actual shows. A few days after the performance, twenty-two year old Ben from London told me "It was so amateur. I just can't see any tradition in it whatsoever...that was far too WWF. You know what I mean? Americanized. There's no way that can be tradition." The idea of this wrestling being connected to global media or serving a function other than the community cohesion his friend Jack referenced earlier seemed implausible, reflecting a neo-colonial imaginary of the timeless Third World existing outside of globalization processes.

Though travelers are sometimes disappointed in the borrowed nature of lucha libre, the events ultimately make a good story and photograph well. They are easily incorporated into an accumulation of stories and photos that legitimize tourists' travels through a foreign, "exotic" land. Though this is not the type of cosmopolitanism that relies on elite class status or flexible citizenship (Ong 1999), it represents an equally important orientation to the world. Some travelers' interactions with the local area consisted entirely of pre-organized tours or "adventures" and patronizing of businesses that cater exclusively to tourists. Though Hannerz comments that "Such travel is not for cosmopolitans, and does little to create cosmopolitans" (1990:241), I argue that while these travelers may not gain competencies for interacting with

other cultures, their experiences are part of an orientation toward the world that consists in accumulating the social capital associated with experiencing Other places and people.

### Accumulating “Difference”

Titanes del Ring events is one of the most popular tourist attractions in La Paz, as evidenced by the long lines of gringos waiting to get into the Multifuncional on Sunday afternoons. But tourism in Bolivia is not a big business compared to many surrounding nations. Bolivia garners roughly 300,000 tourists per year, while neighboring Peru attracts more than two million (UNWTO 2011). This vast difference is attributed to Bolivia’s “political instability” (Library of Congress 2006), paucity of first-class accommodations, and limited number of direct flights. In fact, the World Economic Forum ranked Bolivia as the most unwelcoming tourist destination in the world in 2013. So while Bolivia is a major stopping point on the “Gringo Trail” between the Andes of Peru, Lake Titicaca, and destinations in Argentina or northern Chile (Ypeij and Zoomers 2006), it retains a sense of being somewhat “undiscovered” for many of the travelers. In fact, I asked some of the travelers who temporarily worked in Ekko hostel how much of the “Gringo Trail” they had been through. During breaks from the European football game that played on the bar’s TV they discussed the most obscure places they had been. Tim, a medical student from the U.S. declared, “But Bolivia’s the best. No one even knows where Bolivia is!”

The desire for something new and different was presumably fulfilled by many of the popular attractions in La Paz. Opportunities provided by almost every tour company included climbing the 6,088 meter (19,974 feet) mountain, Huayna Potosi—known as the worlds’ easiest 6000er, visiting the salt flats of Uyuni, and a three day jungle tour in the Rurrenbaque Nature Preserve. Though these “natural” sites ranked most highly, opportunities for experiencing the

“culture” of Bolivia were also promoted by many companies. Tours of the famous Pre-Inca ruins at Tiwanaku were advertised alongside mountain climbing, and visiting the “witches market” complete with “llama fetuses and dried frogs” was a popular activity promoted by the staff at several hostels as a good way to spend the afternoon. Much like exotic animals, nearly impossible mountains, and salt as far as the eye can see, the cholitas luchadoras fulfill the need for an epic and hazardous journey into the unknown exotic continent of South America and legendary stories to tell other backpackers and friends at home, upon return.

Not surprisingly, by far the most popular tourist attraction in La Paz is riding a bike down “death road.” Officially known as Yungas [Jungle] Road, this 38-mile road leads from La Paz to the town of Coroico. It was built as a single lane width gravel road in the 1930s, and includes some overhangs of 550 meters (1800 feet) with no guardrails. It is estimated that since it was built, between 200 and 300 vehicles have plummeted off the road, leading the Inter American Development Bank to bestow on it the title of World’s Most Dangerous Road (Whitaker 2006). Particularly hazardous portions of the road were closed in 2006, leaving it open to biking tours. Despite the fact that about 20 cyclists have died on the road since 1998 (Geoghegan 2010), it remains popular because of the amazing scenery it provides, and the simple sentiment that “you can’t find this anywhere else.”

There was a seeming refusal on the travelers’ parts to believe that the death road was truly dangerous, despite the fact that several people per month were sent to the hospital after minor falls, and one woman even died while biking during my time in La Paz (Charca 2011). Cater argues that “the prime motivation for the practice of adventure is thrill and excitement” (2006: 321). Even though adventure experiences are understood within a discourse of risk, tourists that engage in them have no desire to actually be harmed (Beck 1992). Instead, it is the

unpredictability of the experience that attracts them. As one German woman proclaimed on her social networking site profile, “Today I survived the World’s Most Dangerous Road. Just like 50 other people every day.” Thus, cultural experiences that offer a pretense of danger, yet ultimately keep the travelers safe, are likely to be popular, even if they are not “authentic.”

The cholitas luchadoras fulfill this desire for a pretense of danger, with their “crazy” violence, yet it is still just a performance and doesn’t actually place spectators in danger. The cholitas luchadoras of Titanes del Ring and Andean Secrets have adeptly found a way to combine a number of aspects that tourists desire—exoticism, danger, and tradition—all in package deal for just 80 Bolivianos. As with experiences of natural landscape formations or adventure sports, cholitas luchadoras provide an attraction based on difference that can be collected in the form of stories and pictures. These mementos are then shared with friends at home through posts on social networking websites, and compared with other travelers as they flip through previous pictures on their digital cameras in the hostel bar. The value of the spectacles is not a function of the labor exerted or money exchanged. Rather it is the quality and quantity of experience. The product of this kind of travel is ultimately “an immense accumulation of reflexive experiences which synthesize fiction and reality into a vast symbolism” (MacCannell 1989:23).

Travel is a “performed art” which includes the anticipation and daydreaming that precede the journey as well as reflection during and after the journey (Adler, 1989). This performance includes the consumption of symbolic markers that allow travelers to perform and recognize each other as legitimate (Molz 2006). Indeed, while tourism may expose travelers to “traditional” cultural practices, their consumption behaviors are motivated by the desire to possess a symbol of those cultural practices (Mathieson and Wall 1982:165–9). For most of the travelers I met at

lucha libre events, consumption was not simply about buying specific products, but included the accumulation of non-commodified symbols, such as photographs or the identification bracelets from hostels that many travelers collected on their wrists. The photographs, including those of the Cholitas Luchadoras, function as a friendly competition of evidencing the strange, unusual, exotic, and “risky” things travelers have seen on their trips.



Figure 21. An Ekko Hostel Employee Shows Off the Hostel Bracelets He Has Accumulated in His Photo of Machu Picchu

### Cosmopolitan Cholas

Though marketing images of “authentic culture” are often more driven by profit than truthfulness in representing indigenous peoples (Silver 1993:303), other forms of capital were more important for the luchadoras. While their bodily capital was not necessarily converted into



sufficient economic capital to support themselves full time, for many, their social capital was transformed. Perhaps most noticeably, the luchadoras dress differently than many mujeres de pollera. Though polleras are anything but uncommon in El Alto, most are made from simple cotton fabrics, and worn with plain shoes and unadorned shawls. Some luchadoras wore jeans and a t shirt every day, and other dressed in simple polleras. But when they performed or met me to do publicity, they wore brightly colored garments made of satin or velvet with fringe and sequins that were topped off with intricate jewelry. Their bowler hats were of the highest quality, and they wore shoes reflecting the latest styles advertised in magazine sections of the local newspaper.

Though most claimed that they did not become luchadoras for the fame, they all seemed to enjoy the opportunities brought by international attention. Carmen, who was the featured luchadora in Betty M. Park's documentary, *Mamachas del Ring*, pointed out, "Yo soy en animación plasticine!" [I am in claymation!], then mentioned a second movie, *Cholita Libre* which is already being promoted in La Paz. She told me, "Para mi es muy intresante que vengan personas de otros paises, hacerme una entrevista...y subida al internet, al youtube, entonces mucha gente más va a conocer quién es Carmen Rosa" [For me its really interesting when people come from other countries to interview me...And to be uploaded to the internet, to youtube, so many more people can know who Carmen Rosa is].

Their international popularity has not only given them exposure on the internet, but has also contributed to increased mobility. Some of the more experienced and well-known luchadoras were able to travel throughout Bolivia, South America, and occasionally to other continents because of their wrestling careers. Many luchadoras told stories about traveling to Japan, Argentina, Chile, and Mexico where they performed with local female wrestlers in each

place. When talking about a trip to Argentina Juanita was impressed by the number of people that attended. “Cuando fuimos a Argentina hubo una promoción y vino mucha gente. Mucha, mucha gente! Y muchos de ellos se quedaron afuera!” [When we went to Argentina there was a promotion and many people arrived. Many, many people! And they stayed (lined up) outside!].

The luchadoras, their trainers, and the Andean Secrets tourist company all carved out a niche in which they benefited financially and socially from a sensationalized representation of indigenous women. Though the luchadoras may not have had control over the ways representations of the chola were understood, like other indigenous women who have benefited from essentializing their own subject positions in Bolivia, they were aware of their own self-caricature and were tolerant because of the ways the construct benefitted them (Albro 2000:66).

Lucha libre has given women who wrestle access to forms of cosmopolitanism unimaginable to indigenous women two decades ago. For the luchadoras, their motivation for wrestling comes from a sense of cosmopolitanism that includes access to wealth and privilege (Calhoun 2002), but also international mobility (Diouf 2000, Kothari 2007) and the status gained from international recognition. Juanita and Carmen, like many of their luchadora colleagues, now occupy very different subjectivities and relationships to both their local communities and a globalized world, due to lucha libre.

#### Luchadora Intention: “Somos Modelos a Seguir”

Part of this new cosmopolitan positioning allowed the luchadoras to see themselves as transforming what it is to be an authentic chola. One afternoon as I walked with Juanita and Benita to tourist companies on Calle Sagarnaga, Benita snapped a picture with her cell phone. As she put the phone back in her pocket she noticed a chip in the bright green glittery nail polish

with which her nails had been painted to match the pollera she wore that day. Holding her hand up to inspect it, she told me with a laugh, “Somos cholitas modernas” [We’re modern cholitas]. In the documentary *Goddesses of the Ring* Martha explains that her own mother criticized her. My mother dresses de pollera but I am a modern cholita. I say: Why can’t the cholitas use make up? Why can’t they dye their hair? I’ve done it. They criticize me, my own mother does not like it. She tells me I’m making mujeres de pollera look bad. But I say: It’s my style. Who’s going to stop me? I like the make up so why can’t I use it? Who’s going to stop me? It’s the way I am.

She begins by legitimating her claims to being a cholita with “Why can’t the cholitas use make up?” At the same time, she claims modernity quite explicitly (“I am a modern cholita”) and uses evidence of make up and hair dye to authenticate her identification. She contrasts this idea of the modern chola with that of her mother, who disapproves of it. She also implicitly links this modernity to her involvement in lucha libre as well. Because she is presenting herself to the public—with makeup, with dyed hair, in the ring for an audience—she is violating certain “traditional” notions of what an authentic and good chola should be, and making them “look bad.” However, she defiantly continues to self-identify as a chola.

Like Martha, many of the luchadoras understand the possibility of a “modern cholita” as an exemplar. And though the pollera is sometimes associated with tradition, they see their costumes as essential to the forms of modernity and gender equality they express. When I asked Juanita why they dress as they do she told me, “Yo me pongo mi ropa porque es asi. Es la vestimenta tipica de la mujer de pollera” [I wear my clothing because its like this. It’s the typical clothing of the mujer de pollera].

The cholitas luchadoras almost invariably suggest that they see their performances as empowering for themselves individually and for indigenous Bolivian women in general. In fact,

several have claimed in news media (Clifford 2009, Schipani 2008) that they hope to draw attention to injustices that indigenous women face in Bolivia, and demonstrate the empowerment Bolivian women can achieve. Carmen Rosa told Tom Clifford of *The National*, “After the bouts, women come up to us and thank us for showing that women can break out of their typical roles. It gives them pride and hope. We are role models for a new generation who want to be seen and heard” (2009). Indeed, she acknowledges that the importance is not only “showing the world,” but making a local and personal impact for some women.

Carmen Rosa told me she is proud to be able to defeat the men because they used to taunt her and other luchadoras, saying they could never reach their level. She said her reason for wrestling is “para demostrar que la mujer boliviana es fuerte, que puede practicar el deporte de los varones...Las femeninas podemos hacer algo duro” [to demonstrate that the Bolivian woman is strong, that she can practice a male sport...We women can do hard things]. In these statements she focuses on women’s ability in relationship to men’s and poses wrestling as proof that women are just as strong and capable as men. Indeed, she references all Bolivian women when she proclaims strength, and suggests that they can equally participate in the “male” sport of wrestling.

However in her interview with BBC reporter Andres Schipani she focused on her indigeneity and the discrimination she has experienced, when she explained, “Because we cholitas have been humiliated and very discriminated in the past, that is what drove me mostly to be a fighter. I also wanted to show people not only in Bolivia but around the world that a woman can do what a man can do... and still be an indigenous woman” (2008, translation in original). When referencing her indigeneity here, she relates wrestling to a fight for social equality. She focuses on the discrimination cholas have faced and how it inspired her to become a luchadora.

Juanita also proclaims pride in what she does and positions her wrestling in response to social inequalities. She told me “Ser una luchadora significa que no hay vergüenza ni racismo” [To be a wrestler means that there’s no shame or racism]. She continued to discuss challenges rural people, who are usually indigenous, often face.

Aún hay analfabetismo en lugares rurales, y gente que no sabe cómo vestir bien o interactuar con otra gente ... Hay gente que vive de manera anticuada y conservativa, así que aún hay mujeres que sufren abuso y violencia física y psicológica. Tienen miedo. Y no han estudiado así que no saben mucho en nuestro mundo hoy en día, o como cambió nuestra realidad... Pero creo que va a cambiar, va a cambiar pronto. Justamente somos un ejemplo de ese cambio. Somos un modelo a seguir.

There is still illiteracy in rural areas, and there are people who don’t know how to dress well or how to interact with people ... There are people that live in old fashioned and conservative ways, so there are still women who suffer from physical and psychological abuse and violence. They are afraid. And they haven’t studied so they don’t know much about our world these days or how our reality has changed... But I think that’s going to change, it’s going to change soon. We are actually an example of that change. We are role models.

Particularly in declaring that the cholitas luchadoras are role models, Juanita suggests that the changes are not just important for the wrestlers themselves, but that they are leaders for a much broader group of indigenous and rural people in Bolivia. For Juanita, the luchadoras represent a form of modernity to which rural people should aspire. She mentions illiteracy, lack of schooling, and abuse of women as the indications of “old fashioned and conservative” life. She later spoke about women in a way that sheds light on the characteristics she sees as positive and modern: “Mujeres son luchadoras ahora. Trabajan en oficinas, por ejemplo, tienen trabajos como arquitectas, abogadas, y más. La única cosa que nos hace diferente que mujeres en otros países es como vestimos. Somos inteligentes. Somos bellas” [Women are fighters now. They work in offices, for example, they have jobs as architects, lawyers, and more. The only thing that makes us different from women in other countries is how we dress. We are intelligent. We are beautiful].

In their statements, Martha, Carmen Rosa, and Juanita continue to emphasize their authenticity as cholitas while claiming modern identities. These women, like other subaltern individuals are articulating locally relevant desires for social change through “images and institutions of Western-style progress” that resonate in the local culture (Knauft 2002a:14). Martha’s rhetorical questions “Why can’t cholitas...?” and “Who’s going to stop me?” serve to shift ideas about what makes an authentic chola. Carmen Rosa and Juanita reference the strength and assertive nature of Bolivian women, explaining how wrestling is simply an extension of qualities of which Bolivian women have always been proud. And in authenticating their traditional yet modern identities, they legitimate their participation in lucha libre as an important way in which they empower themselves as well as Bolivian women in general.

When I first met Juanita, she immediately showed me her passport, and pointed out her U.S. visa. She beamed with pride when she mentioned that she had just returned from appearing on the Show de Cristina, a daytime Spanish language talk show on Univisión based in Miami. Cristina Saralegui, a Cuban-born US journalist is something of a Latina Oprah Winfrey. She not only hosted her popular talk show, but was a former editor of Spanish Cosmopolitan magazine, published her own magazine (Cristina: La Revista), developed a line of fashion accessories and bed and bath furnishings, and was even honored with a star on the Hollywood walk of fame. Juanita brought up her trip to the United States a number of times during our first interview, mentioning the five star hotel where she stayed, other international luchadores she met, as well as models and celebrities she was introduced to.

Carmen Rosa went on and on after our first interview about traveling to New York for the premiere of *Mamachas del Ring*, the documentary film in which she was featured. After asking me how I liked Bolivia, she recounted how much she had loved being in the United States and

feeling like a celebrity for a few days. She told me about her hotel, the food, and seeing the Statue of Liberty. These experiences clearly constituted important opportunities for the luchadoras.

Carmen Rosa expressed desires for more travel in an interview on Radio Atipiri, an El Alto-based station focused on “comunidades y pueblos indígenas” [indigenous communities and towns]. When asked what her highest goal is, she responded, “Quiero llegar a las arenas de México, la cuna de la lucha libre, conocer personalmente a los luchadores de ahí. Al inicio de mi carrera nunca había pensado causar tanto impacto en el ring, ser la atracción de los medios internacionales.” [I want to arrive in the arenas of Mexico, the cradle of lucha libre, to personally meet the wrestlers there. At the beginning of my career I never would have thought I could cause so much impact in the ring, to be the attraction of international media.]. Wrestling, for women like Carmen Rosa and Juanita, allows new exposure and travel opportunities, granting them mobility rare among Bolivian women of their economic background. But here specifically, in addition to reflecting on the success she’s had in Bolivia, Carmen Rosa expressed desires for more: international fame, specifically in Mexico, a place seen as a more authentic and legitimate context for lucha libre.

### Performing Cosmopolitanism

Rockefeller outlines two models of how folkloric festivals function, separating participants’ goals into a “romantic nationalist” function and a “touristic” model. The performances of the cholitas luchadoras may be said to serve both, by expressing a commonality between the performers and local audience in “a common patrimony that binds them together,” while also emphasizing difference in their displays for foreign audiences (1999:124).

The relationships created between tourists and the luchadoras was in large part symbolic. If travel is a performed art, it is also an art that allows for a performance of cosmopolitanism by those who receive and entertain travelers. While tourists gained the symbolic capital of experiencing other people and places, the luchadoras gained a sense of having an impact on the world. As this increased social capital makes clear, locals must be understood as something more than passive recipients of “touristic invaders.” Edward Bruner (2005:17-18) instead stresses that locals and travelers are engaged in a “co-production.” Indigenous people at the margins may develop their own performances based on their subject positions and thus influence conceptions of the nation and power relations between travelers and performers. As Ypeij demonstrates for indigenous Peruvian weavers, international tourism allows women to renegotiate their indigeneity toward greater access to forms of economic and social capital (2010:13).

Tourism strengthens indigeneity, but in surprising ways. The luchadoras draw on nostalgic notions of traditional indigenous women, through dress and advertisement, but as William astutely pointed out, “there’s no way you can say this is traditional.” Their acts of physical violence, and the recognizably imported style of lucha libre call into question whether the “traditional” can exist in the context of globalized flows of people, ideas, and capital. La Paz activist, David Aruquipa Pérez suggested “Creo que de la marginalidad [de las cholitas luchadoras] ha posicionado transgresoramente su presencia pública hasta apropiarse de una popularidad nacional e internacional” [I believe the marginality of the cholitas luchadoras has transgressively positioned their public presence to gain a national and international popularity]. Aruquipa’s words ring true, but the transgressions of the luchadoras may have more to do with crossing status, economic, and physical boundaries, rather than exploding racial and gender stereotypes. The cholitas luchadoras have positioned themselves internationally in a way that



men in their same line of work have been unable to do. Though not without complicated effects, they have turned representation on its head by benefiting from the essentialism and exoticism associated with indigenous women. Being “more Indian” has allowed them to transform social marginality into cultural capital, and create new modes of existing in the world with their limited resources.

## CHAPTER 6

### LADY BLADE AND THE CHOLITAS LUCHADORAS: GENDER, NATIONALISM, AND GLOBALIZATION

The luchadoras of LIDER and Titanes del Ring were quite successful in attracting international attention with tourists attending their shows and foreign media circulating heavily. And it was this visibility that in large part contributed to the resentment Super Catch luchadores felt toward them. Yet Super Catch made their own claims to cosmopolitanism using a resources Titanes del Ring and LIDER did not have at their disposal—Lady Blade.

On 23 March, 2012, I put on my Lady Blade Costume in the locker room of the Coliseo de Villa Victoria, took a deep breath, and was ready for my first live performance. As I stepped out into the arena, Oswald, who was running the audio and video for the event handed me the microphone. He asked me what I would like to say to the audience before my first lucha in Bolivia, and in “puro ingles” (as always), I responded, “I want to thank the people of Bolivia for giving me an opportunity to demonstrate my skill and represent the people of the United States. I’m excited to wrestle with Betty and I hope it will be a fair fight. Thank you Bolivia!!!!” And with that I joined my opponent Betty “the Super Cholita” in the ring. We both climbed onto the ropes, me shouting “USA” and waving my arms attempting to get the crowd to join in. Though I couldn’t hear anyone repeating my chant, there was certainly clapping and whistling in my support.

Betty and I performed the moves we had decided upon, and Lince entered the ring after a short time. I yelled that it was unfair for me to wrestle a man, and we engaged in a mock argument about whether the match would continue. The argument ended with him attempting a closeline, and me ducking. We then did our usual repertoire of mariposas and cazadoras. Each

time I threw Lince to the ground the audience cheered. After I left Lince on the ring floor with a successful tijeras clave, Gran Mortis entered the ring and began punching him. In the meantime, Betty and I continued grappling in the corner, throwing each other to the ground over and over. Kazama entered and punched Gran Mortis. Then one by one each Super Catch luchador entered the ring, most dressed simply in jeans and t-shirts with masks covering their faces. This resulted in a full-blown free-for-all with Betty and I still grappling on the ground outside the ring using a plastic chair. In the end, Jorge, dressed as his zombie character, El Condenado, cleared the ring. I walked back to Oswald who asked me what I thought of the match. I said into the microphone, “It wasn’t fair. I came here to wrestle Betty. Its not fair that these men came into the ring and took over. I want another chance! Next week, here at the same time, I want a rematch with Betty.” And with that I walked back into the locker room, followed by a parade of young Bolivian children hoping for a photo with me.

### Wrestler as Nationalist Icon

In this event, which involved elements of corporeal, linguistic, and sartorial performance, I expressly highlighted my nationality as a key component of the Lady Blade character. Such nationalist appeals are not uncommon in wrestling, particularly in the United States. Often in WWE matches, announcers proclaim where a wrestler “hails from” as they enter the ring. Many “babyface” (the US equivalent of técnico) characters carry the US flag, shout pro-US chants, or employ patriotic colors to garner audience support. Further many invoke U.S. patriotism in efforts to espouse their virtue, speaking of “American” values of hard work, dignity, believing in oneself, and honesty. In the 1980s, for example, Hulk Hogan encouraged his “Hulkamaniac” followers—often young children—to observe the “three demandments: training, prayer, and vitamins” (Beekman 2006).

Likewise, wrestlers from (or claiming to be from) countries with which the United States has political tensions are able to do the converse. Many have constructed heel (the US equivalent of rudo) characters based on allegiance to countries the United States considers enemies (Oppliger 2003). They may claim their home country has greater values, or simply challenge the audience's patriotism. During the Cold War, The Bolsheviks were a prominently featured tag team who sang the Soviet National Anthem before matches, and during the Desert Storm invasion, Iranian wrestler Col. Mustafa teamed with the Iraqi sympathizer Sgt. Slaughter to promote a pro-Iraqi stance, often covering incapacitated opponents with an Iraqi flag. Audiences love to hate these characters because they are easy targets.

Indeed, using national imagery to distinguish wrestling characters is one of the easiest ways to excite an audience. Because nationalism links land, political identification, and group affiliation together, it is one of the most powerful lines that can be drawn to delineate insiders and outsiders (Deloria 1998:21). As Anderson further explains, "dying for one's country, which usually one does not choose, assumes a moral grandeur which dying for the Labor Party, the American Medical Association, or perhaps even Amnesty International cannot rival, for those are all bodies one can join or leave at easy will" (1983:148). Though the violence in the wrestling ring is certainly not on the level of the wars to which Anderson refers, wrestlers who submit to physical pain while proclaiming themselves to be representative of their nation call upon this same "moral grandeur." To create a character that symbolizes a nation immediately garners either support or disapproval from the audience in a way that characters reflecting martial arts styles (such as Dragón Galáctico or Jin Boy) and film characters (la Momia or Chucky) do not. Characters like Lady Blade (representing the United States) and the cholitas luchadoras (representing Bolivia) are immediately understood by audience members.

In using national symbolism within the theatrical aspects of wrestling performances, wrestlers like myself draw on the knowledge that sport occupies a prominent place in the ideological rhetoric of several forms of nationalism (Alter 1994:557). Indeed, drawing on Bennett (1966) and Riordan (1977), Alter observes that wrestlers, like many athletes, are often “made into a symbol who unambiguously stands for his or her country” (1994:557). In essence they represent an imagined community and the “deep, horizontal comradeship” that Anderson (1983:7) explains is essential to concepts of the nation and nationalism. However, McClintock’s term “invented community” perhaps carries more salience here, as the phrase gestures more substantially toward the fact that nations are constituted in the social practices of media, school, popular culture. As she writes, “Nationalism both invents and performs social difference, enacting it ritualistically in Olympic extravaganzas, mass rallies and military displays, flag waving and costumery, and becoming thereby constitutive of people’s identities” (1991:104).

Culture, and specifically sport, in all nations always involves the political (Jarvie and Reid 1999:98). Indeed, athletics are sometimes used as a tool of dominant state ideology in which the nation is represented as fit, virile, and heroic (Hoberman 1984) and used to bolster leaders’ claims to success. Furthermore, Levermore suggests that sports can ideologically reach communities in ways that politician and government agencies cannot (2008:184). Cho calls the “nationalist sentiment or ideology” created and perpetuated through sport, “sporting nationalism,” and suggests that unlike hegemonic forms of nationalism such as government propaganda, this form fosters “an emotional, expressive attachment...[which] often elicits voluntary patriotism” (2009:349). By creating a common focus, sport is an efficient tool for fostering unity and collective identities (Cho 2009:348), and at times even replaces work, religion, and local community as the “glue of collective consciousness” (Andrews 2001).

International sport competitions function effortlessly as a metaphor for the state of the nation at the popular political level (Rowe 1999). Alter suggests that athletes easily become national icons because they occupy the position of fantasy figures and are divorced from the economic infrastructure (1994). However, Sammond goes to great lengths to demonstrate how professional wrestlers in the United States are very much “workers” in a Marxian sense, doubly alienated from their labor power, through the use of characters (2005:5). Indeed, they very much rely on bodily capital to perform as athletes. However, Alter’s point that the wrestler become a “Herculean hero” remains. Suggesting that some athletes fill the same role as the artistic works of Soviet realism, “they do so as ideological icons whose labor power is translated into national physical fitness” (1994:558). In essence, the wrestler’s bodily capital in some ways elevates them from simply selling their labor power. Though they remain alienated from their labor, they are also recognized as national symbols.

As national symbols, athletes, and wrestlers specifically, may easily reinforce hegemonic conceptions of reality, as Ball contends (1990:139-140). But in some contexts, the characters also may function as a working-class critique of elite values (Nonini and Teraoka 1992). As Rowe writes, while almost all sport is in some way aligned with some conception of nation, the way sport has developed in different countries varies according to history (2003:285). Similarly, the specific form nationalism takes makes all the difference. Alter describes Indian nationalism as body-centered, and thus, wrestling and its associated bodily discipline may be used as a reactionary form of “somatic nationalism” (1994:579). But the senses of nationalism most often found in Bolivia are very different. As discussed in Chapter 3, most Bolivians’ relationships to their nation-state take one of two forms (though at times they intersect). The first is indigenous pride surrounding protest and revolution. The second is something of an inferiority complex and

a pained longing for greater integration into the global economy in ways that allow for greater financial opportunities for individuals. As Sanchez-León notes, in the Andean communities of Peru and Bolivia, nationalism is a historically complex issue. He suggests that “to this day....[they] still do not know whether to side with the conquerors or the conquered” (1994:145). Though I feel this interpretation of “conquerors vs. conquered” lacks nuance, there certainly is tension between a sense of pride in aspects of the nation that are “authentically Bolivian” and hope for a better future that rests in further global integration. One way these two strains of nationalism manifest is in rhetoric advocating the advancement of Bolivia.

Promotional segments Super Catch wrestlers filmed for the Palanque TV channel revealed much about the kind of nationalism that was intertwined with the sport. One Saturday morning in June, Big Boy, Super Cuate, Big Man, Estigma, and Lady Blade met near the futbol stadium and walked to the studios of canal 48, Palanque TV to record commercial messages aimed at children<sup>6</sup>. The channel was planning to start airing lucha libre, under the name Tigres del Ring [Tigers of the Ring] and the promotional spots we recorded were set to come at the end of commercial breaks, partly to advertise the lucha libre program that would begin in the coming months.

This television station itself is in some ways nationalist in nature. It is not nationalized—neither government owned nor operated, but it does espouse a very particular nationalistic ideology through its programming. Palenque TV is a project of Veronica Palenque, daughter of the late Carlos Palenque Avilés. Carlos was a Bolivian presidential candidate in 1989 and 1993, running for the CONDEPA (Conciencia de Patria or National Conscience) party. In 1993, he received just over 14% of the vote, putting him in second place behind Gozalo Sanchez de

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<sup>6</sup> It was these commercial promotions that eventually caught the attention of my acquaintance Ique, revealing my “secret identity,” as discussed in Chapter 2.

Lozada, who garnered about 35.5%. But perhaps more importantly, in the 1960s, Carlos, who then had long hair, was a popular protest-song writer and singer. After a short solo career, he joined Los Caminantes [The Walkers], a pop-folk group that quickly became one of the most popular bands of time in La Paz. He eventually went back to a solo singing career, and the Bolivian National TV station (the only TV station in Bolivia at the time), asked him to do a weekly live music show aimed at indigenous and rural-origin peoples living in La Paz. The program was named La Tribuna Libre del Pueblo [The Community's Open Forum], and Palenque solicited Adolfo Paco (who later became a lucha libre promoter for the television station ATB), and Remedios Loza to join him. "Comadre Remedios," as she was called, acted as Palenque's cohost, and was an essential addition because she dressed de pollera and was identified with indigeneity more closely than the men. She and Carlos remained close, and after his death she ran for President in his place in 1997.

Veronica herself served in the Bolivian National Congress from 1997-2000. She first formed a radio station in 2000, with the objective to continue the line of social welfare, information, education, and training that Compadre Palenque (referring to her father) left behind as his principles, and ideology (Red Palenque Website). In 2011 Veronica expanded on her radio programming to form canal 48, Palenque TV. In an interview with the Television en Bolivia Blog she says that the object of the channel was to carry on the name of her father and teach the ideas he left behind. In essence the goal of the channel is to continue the legacy of an open forum for Bolivians, both rural and indigenous identified people, and urban mestizos and criollos, but always with the heritage of nation and goals of progress in mind. Indeed, the backdrop against which the luchadores appeared featured local manta cloth and a Chakana, the Andean cross.



We started out recording a clip where we (attempted to) say in unison “Hola amigos! Somos Tigres del Ring, pronto por Palenque TV!” [Hey buddies! We are Tigers of the Ring, next on Palenque TV!]. We failed at speaking in unison and after about ten tries ended up just saying “Hola Amigitos” together, with Big Man announcing who we were and Big Boy promoting the station. After our group recording, we each recorded a short PSA style message for kids. These messages were not our own of course, but were written by Veronica and handed to us to memorize about half an hour before recording. My little script was written in Spanish as “Practicar deportes, alimentarse sanamente, y alejarse de vicios son las claves de una vida exitosa. Ustedes pueden ser héroes. Es un mensaje de Lady Blade, junta con los Tigres del Ring. Estaremos pronto por Palenque TV.” But of course Edgar wanted me to do it in English (I didn’t mind), so I translated it as “Practicing sports, eating healthy, and staying away from drugs are the keys to a successful life. You can be a hero! This is a message from Lady Blade and the Tigres del Ring on Palenque TV.” My script was full of moralizing messages that seem to conflate bodily health with some sort of emotional or social decency, but was not surprising given the social welfare, information, education, and training espoused in the Palenque radio station’s mission statement.

Especially interesting were the references to “our country” most of the other luchadores had in their scripts. Big Man’s was the most explicit. His went something like: “To support our beautiful country, Bolivia, we need to work hard and stay healthy.” Estigma’s began with “Drugs and alcohol destroy your life! But we can be heroes for our country, Bolivia, by staying fit and respecting each other.” Edgar’s concentrated on keeping Bolivia beautiful by recycling, caring for water, and not polluting. Finally Super Cuate’s was short and simple, “The values of respect, education, and consideration make us heroes for Bolivia.” And with these short comments, the

luchadores made explicit their (or at least their characters') commitments to moral living as allegiance to the nation.

### Lady Blade: Norte American Hero

Despite Lady Blade's participation in the Palanque TV clips, the symbolism of a North American wrestler in Bolivia was very different than that of the other Super Catch luchadores. Barthes writes that the wrestler is a "basic sign"—not fully a character or player (2000:18), but as Sammond points out, this reading ignores the levels of signification that wrestlers often go through pains to inscribe on themselves (2005:6). Indeed, wrestlers go beyond performing as individuals and become "commodity packages" (Sammond 2005:7). Signifiers of my North Americanness as part of my own commodity package were present throughout this performance and those in the ring.

The most immediately obvious commodity I used in performance was my body. As in many forms of performance, my body was "metonymic of self, of character, of voice, of presence" (Phelan 1993:150). Particularly important as well was the costume that variously covered and exposed my body. I wore a red white and blue costume of spandex that was not only visually differentiated from the cholitas luchadoras' polleras but also revealed my very-non-chola-like body build. My antifaz obscured my eyes, but my European looking nose and longish, blondish hair were still visible. And since my hair was always down around my shoulders at Edgar's suggestion, it became a visual focal point in the matches, swirling around in the air as I flipped, much like the polleras of the cholitas.

Gaines writes that costume in film primarily serves to relay information about the character to the audience (1990:181). And like the gang members Dwight Conquergood discusses, my red, white, and silver costume was used to "fabricate an emblematic identity"

much as sports teams “deploy totemic colors” (1994:206). In essence, costumes work to reinforce narratives (Gaines 1990:181), borrowing popular conceptions to call upon familiar types. Gaines writes that “the wide apron identifies the mammy, the feather boa the floozie, and the turban with bananas, the Latin American rhumba dancer—visual shorthand, which depends...on ideological premises lodged in this iconography” (Gaines 1990:203-204). Because of the primacy of the body in wrestling, costume is a primary mode—if not *the* primary mode—that information about characters is communicated. Thus my costume, both in what it revealed about my body as well as how it covered it, clearly signified my North Americanness.

Though it is not as important in the ring, language is also employed in promotions on television and immediately before the match. In the case of Lady Blade, I always shouted “USA” as I entered the ring, climbing onto the ropes and encouraging the audience to shout with me (though no one ever joined in). On television, and in pre-match interviews, I always spoke in English, with Edgar and Victor constantly reminding me “puro ingles!” Anderson emphasizes the connection between language and the nation state, suggesting the privacy of language (anchored in the time it takes to learn a language rather than an innate connection between nation and tongue) delineates affiliation. Specifically, he writes that through common language “fellowships are imagined” (1983:158).

But in my case, language was used to distinguish difference. English was important because it distinguished me, rather than communicated my belonging. It marked me as a very specific kind of outsider, not only outside of Bolivian belonging, but as invested in a different nation. As Anderson explains, “The Tiger has no need of Tigritude. In other words, Tigritude appears necessary only at the point where two uncertain beasts mirror themselves in each other's exiled eyes (1998:130). I spoke Castellano (a South American form of Spanish—distinguished

from the Spanish spoken by Spaniards) every day, but in an effort to perform not only my North Americanness but my allegiance to the United States, English became a primary signifier. Thus, I became defined by my appearance and my language. As Sammond writes, in wrestling “Complex markers of [nationality] are stripped of the contextual noise of home, community, and locality and set against each other in a raw, emotional struggle for supremacy” (2005:19). This simplicity made me easily read by the audience as a symbol of the United States.

Especially when more than one nation is being represented, this kind of national symbolism is not neutral. Lady Blade could have easily become a ruda, given the current strained relations between Bolivia and the United States. In addition to President Evo Morales’s desire to “decolonize” Bolivia, and his frequent derogatory remarks toward US leaders, the two countries both expelled the other’s ambassador in 2008, and have still not rectified diplomatic relations. Bolivia is often used as a symbol of the “backwaters” of the world in rhetoric of the United States. Its mention in popular films is often used as a stand-in for a far away place. When I watched the movie *Horrible Bosses* with my friend Gustavo, he feigned offense when a character suggests chemical waste should be sent to Bolivia. Similarly, Woody Allen’s *Manhattan* includes a reference to “those barefoot kids from Bolivia who need foster parents.” In the context of wrestling, Bolivia’s symbolism as globally peripheral was clear when the producer for the Ohio-based regional wrestling organization, Ring of Honor commented “We are looking at independents and other place like Ohio Valley. If we have to look for talent in Bolivia, we will” (Curry 2011).

Conversely, the specter of the US looms large in Bolivia. Ex-Bolivian president Gonzalo “Goni” Sanchez de Lozada is currently being harbored in a Washington, D.C. suburb as Bolivia seeks extradition to try him for human rights abuses. The United States is also seen as a symbol

of neocolonialism, with president Evo Morales blaming US led economic mandates for deteriorating Bolivia's economy and their drug policies for unfairly imposing sanctions on Bolivia. And as in much of the world, US mass media dominates television, film, and popular culture. Specifically, wrestling from the United States is the standard to which Bolivian wrestling is compared. DVDs of the latest WWE pay-per-view program are available in almost every video stand in La Paz's informal markets, and Steve Austin, Hulk Hogan, and The Rock are household names.

But nationalism becomes important when the difference between nations is marked (Woodward, 1997: 9). And more specifically, sport events are more meaningful and powerful when the audience can extrapolate sociocultural significance from the action (Rowe 2003:285). So while a Bolivian nationalist character wrestling in the United States would not necessarily invoke strong audience reaction, the symbolism of the Lady Blade character was clear to Bolivian audiences.

Perhaps it was even the ubiquity of US wrestling that granted me the social capital to appear as a *técnica* rather than a *ruda*. Though most governmental relations between Bolivia and the United States are strained, my statements while on television and before matches fell amicably with Bolivian audiences, when I said that that I had come to La Paz to learn a new style of wrestling. On the program *En Boca de Todos* [On Everyone's Tongue], with Jorge translating, I explained

Well, in the United States, most of the wrestling relies only on strength. But in Bolivia, there are so many amazing wrestlers that have great agility, speed, and are great acrobats. I wanted to come learn from them in order to develop these skills in my own style. I also wanted to come to wrestle the *cholitas luchadoras* because they have become famous all over the world, and I admire them as strong women.

“Well, we are very happy that you have come to our country to learn. Buena suerte! Y esperamos que disfrutas nuestro lindo país” [Good luck! And we hope you enjoy our beautiful country] the

interviewer replied enthusiastically. Indeed, I managed to affirm myself, my national and *lucha libre* “heritage,” as well as Bolivia all at once. In contrast to Conquergood’s discussion of street gang member’s linguistic acts of “affirmation by negation” (1994:210), I doubly affirmed both countries by explaining that I had something to learn from Bolivian *luchadores*. For a representative of an international political and wrestling superpower nation to say that they are seeking to learn from a population that often experiences their position in the world as peripheral (see Chapter 3) was a point of pride for both this interviewer and many of the *luchadores* I met.

There was another dimension to my popularity as well: my whiteness. Though my skin is quite pale, by whiteness I mean a set of traits of which skin color is only part. As several scholars explain, whiteness is the host of symbols that stand in for normalcy and truth (Dyer 1997:12), privilege (Wing 2003), property ownership (Weismantel 2001:xxx), middle class economics and “proper” morality (Gill 1993:81, Yano 2006:25), honor (Wade 2009:141), beauty (Banet-Weiser 2006, Dyer 1997), cleanliness and health (Gill 1993:81, Stephenson 1999, Weismantel 2001), order (Gill 1993:81), and futurity (Baldwin 2012). Weismantel points out that in the Andes specifically, wealth and social power are associated with whiteness (2001:244). The important converse of whiteness as a set of symbols, is that not all people who have light skin possess other symbols that allow them to perform and/or be included in the category “white” (Hartigan 2005). As Nowatski writes, whiteness is not simply having “a certain ancestry, skin tone, hair color and texture, or facial features; rather it is constituted by performing what others consider to be ‘white’” (2007:116).

Though Dyer suggests whiteness is usually invisible (1997), in a city where over seventy percent of the population claim indigeneity, whiteness stands out. Aside from the tourists walking around downtown, whiteness usually appears often in forms of idealized display. This

was particularly true in the beauty industry of La Paz, where whiteness functioned as a mode of desire.

One afternoon, the Super Catch luchadores decided to walk from the practice ring to la Ceja, where those of us who lived in central La Paz would catch busses home. During our hour long walk down Avenida 16 de Julio, I noticed a sign for a hair salon. “Beliza Marta” [Marta’s Beauty Shop] it announced with pictures of three blonde white women below, which I embarrassingly recognized as the “girlfriends” of Playboy Magazine owner Hugh Hefner from their reality television show. Many of the peluquerias throughout the city used standard photos in their windows of both men and women with Loreal or Pantene logos on them, but this sign had clearly been specially ordered. Canessa similarly writes that in Sorata (a “provincial” town 3 hours from La Paz), men’s barber shops usually display pictures of white men as examples of “male beauty to be admired and copied” for the indigenous and mestizo men in the barber chair (2008:50). There were also several billboards around the center of La Paz advertising rhinoplasty for both men and women showing before photos of large protruding “indigenous” noses and after pictures of “ski-jump” shaped European looking noses.

Another venue in which the value of whiteness becomes clear, as Canessa points out, are Bolivia’s beauty pageants (2008:43). In a strange twist of events I found myself in a local beauty pageant in July of 2012. A friend who owned a small business in La Paz asked me to help represent the company at the yearly La Paz Business Expo. Unknowingly, his business partner also entered me in the asafat [hostess] competition at the expo, and though my participation clashed with every ounce of my feminist sensibility, I decided I might learn something from the experience and did not withdraw my name. I found myself strutting around the expo center floor in high heels among a group of 15 other women, all of whom appeared to be in their late teens.

In the portion of the competition in which I was expected to give a two minute presentation on the product I was representing I fumbled over my words (this time wishing I could exchange Castellano for “puro ingles”). As I posed for judges and tried to keep a smile on my face, I knew I lacked the practiced poise of the other contestants. In the end I did not make the top five. But as I wiped off my makeup in the bathroom after the coronation had finished, a woman approached me, asking for my name and telephone number. She represented a modeling and pageant agency in La Paz and told me she could easily find me work as a model. “Do you realize I’m at least 15 years older than these girls?” I thought to myself. But I gave her my contact information anyway. A week later she called with a job offer, but I declined, realizing among other things that the bruises and sore muscles I usually suffered from wrestling would not translate well to a modeling career. Though she never specifically mentioned my whiteness in general, she did complement my hair and facial features, all which likely served as a stand-in for my whiteness.

But the association of whiteness with beauty extends to high profile, national pageants as well. In a predominantly indigenous country Miss Bolivia is almost always from Santa Cruz, the major lowland city, whose population is known for the population appearing more European than in the altiplano. Fabricant notes that public spectacles of beauty in this region mark the women as “white and modern, unlike their Andean counterparts, who are darker-skinned, shorter, and ‘backward’” (2009:775). Indeed, as Miss Bolivia 2004 declared in English at that year’s Miss Universe pageant in Quito, Ecuador

Unfortunately, people who don’t know Bolivia very much think that we are all just Indians from the west side of the country, that is, La Paz—all the images that we see are coming from that side of the country—poor people and very short people and Indian people. I’m from the other side of the country, the east side, and it’s not cold, it’s very hot and we are tall and we



are white people and we know English, so all that misconception that Bolivia is only an Andean country, it's wrong, Bolivia has a lot to offer, and that's my job as an ambassador of my country to let people know much diversity we have.

Not surprisingly this was the source of much (mostly negative) Bolivian media attention (El Diario, 27 May 2004), as well as some international exposure (New York Times, 29 May 2004). But perhaps most tellingly, the incident was recounted in the popular Bolivian film, *Quien mató a la llamita blanca?* [Who Killed the Little White Llama?], in which a rural altiplano-appearing male character tells the story, paraphrasing Miss Bolivia's words as "In Eastern Bolivia, where I am from, everyone is tall, white, speaks English, and watches *Friends* on TV." The equation of whiteness and beauty appears in more quotidian contexts as well. The newspaper magazine supplement I picked up in 2009 for its pictures of "Cholita Fashion" featured indigenous-looking women in that section only (Figure X). All the other women in the supplement looked more like Miss Bolivia than any of the women I saw on the street. Television talk show hosts also all look like beauty queens, often appearing to be in their mid-twenties while their male counterparts (who also appear white) are in their mid to late forties. To this list of the contexts in which whiteness is portrayed as desirable, Canessa adds billboards, beer posters, television advertisements, and church publications, reminding the reader that for both women and men, "whiteness is presented as an object of desire – what they should desire in the opposite sex as well as for their own bodies" (2008:51).



Figure 22. Fashion Section of La Razón Newspaper, 7 August 2009

For those Bolivians that can claim whiteness—because of their bodily capital—it is usually a point of pride. For me, whiteness meant that I was a novelty. My hair, my language, and my nation of origin authenticated readings of me (and the character of Lady Blade) as white. And Super Catch luchadores used this to their advantage. Much as tourists in La Paz are excited by the exoticism of the cholitas luchadoras, the local Paceños and Alteños in the Coloseo de Villa Victoria were interested in seeing me perform because in the context I was exotic.

### Whiteness as Cosmopolitanism

But whiteness is not a static *thing*, it is always in process. And in the current moment of global media and flexible accumulation the fetishization of whiteness bleeds into desires for the

global. As Canessa writes, aspirations to progress and modernity are often “frustrated” with whiteness (2008:51). Whiteness is a sign of the global in many ways. As the filmic reinterpretation of Miss Bolivia’s comment so clearly demonstrates, whiteness, English, and global media like the show *Friends* fit together in a seemingly natural way. Thus, for indigenous and mestizo Alteños (or at least for most of them), the fetishization of whiteness is not a neocolonial form of symbolic violence and self-loathing, but it simply a part of cosmopolitan desire.

This formation reaches back as far as globalization on the South American continent. As Wade writes of Latin America, in the immediately post-colonial period, the class societies of the new republics were very much stratified by race with the elites clinging to privilege through appeals to whiteness (2009:114). At the same time, intellectuals in Europe and North America were linking modernity and progress to whiteness. Stephenson, in writing about literal spatial divisions between indigenous peoples and criollos in La Paz during this period points out the wall enclosing the city as a physical manifestation that had to be crossed in order to become “modern” (1999:7).

Even after the revolution of 1952, when indigenous peoples formally gained citizenship rights, films from the United States became the principal form through which the population consumed “modernity” (López 2000:72). Gill also writes that Paceños who identified as white in the late 1980s and early 1990s used their claims of both racial and cultural whiteness to control national politics as well as the nation’s wealth (1994:74).

Today, whiteness in Bolivia is linked to the cosmopolitan through media, mobility and commerce. Gill writes that NGO staff, engaged in development and modernizing projects, are usually white foreigners (2000:33). And among Bolivians who are considered white, Weismantel

counts primarily the wealthy “jet-setting super-elites” (2001:xxxi). Using assertions of racial superiority, they claim a part of the global order of power (2001:xxx).

This is especially true in Santa Cruz, where people are not only more phenotypically light skinned, but participate in international commerce to an extent uncommon in the altiplano.

Gustafson uses the example of the EXPOCRUZ fair, which put Cruceño economic power on display. He describes the fair as a middle-class social event as well as a business networking event, drawing almost half a million visitors. The fair’s director, Gabriel Dabdoub, who is a descendant of Lebanese immigrants, invited the audience in his opening address to “gaze upon modernity with the eyes of peasants,” in order to consume in the global market. Visitors could try out first-class Aerosur airline seats. In the livestock areas, Gustafson looked at the latest advances in artificial insemination and genetic selection. “Down the way, a person dressed as a \$US100 dollar bill handed out flyers at the Cattlemen’s Bank stand” (Gustafson 2006:367-368).

As Gustafson summarizes, residents of Santa Cruz highlighted their “urban, cosmopolitan whiteness as an expression of their aspiration to participate in an idealized ‘global’ middle-upper class consumer society (2006:357). Indeed, it is the involvement in neoliberal market relations that often delineates “white” criollos from Indians and mestizos in Bolivia (Stephenson 1999:2).

In addition to regional stereotypes, another important demarcation between white and non-white in Bolivia is the difference between urban and rural. Raymond Williams famously argued that the city is a symbol of “learning, communications, light” while the country is indicative of “a place of backwardness, ignorance, imitation” (1973:1). Cities in the Andes are understood to be white in a way that rural areas can never achieve (Weismantel 2001:5).

Weismantel cites a 1997 edition of the journal *Abya Yala News* titled “Indian City,” and the puzzlement many South Americans felt at the title which they deemed to be contradictory. The

city as they understood it, protects the whiteness of residents and acts as a boundary to the nonwhite countryside residents (2001:19).

Canessa contends that the urban culture devalues rural culture, through the dominant national imaginary in which urban, Western-oriented, modern culture is contrasted with the rural, the anachronistic, and the Indian (2005:132). He tells a story of a Pocabaya student, Agustina, who recounted to him that “white people are better [than us] because they are clever and live in cities and are wealthy” (2004:192). Thus, whiteness is attached, even for young children, to intelligence, economic resources, and the metropolitan centers of Bolivia.

But of course, my whiteness is read differently than that of Cruceños or elite Paceños. Partially because of the diacritics of costume and language that made up an important part of the Lady Blade character, my whiteness was associated not only with urbanity and mobility, but with the very specific global center of the United States. This is not to say that “the West invented modernity and other modernities are derivative and second-hand”—a point which Ong vehemently argues against (2006:61). Rather, I mean that the imaginary of the United States for many Bolivians becomes iconic of global cosmopolitanism.

And the US is very much present in the imaginations of many people in Bolivia. Though television and film media from the United States has thoroughly penetrated Bolivian popular culture, new US produced consumer products (as opposed to used products discussed in Chapter 3) are usually outrageously expensive given high tariffs and visas to visit the US are notoriously impossible to obtain. The United States then is an absent other. As Inda and Rosaldo contend, “in conditions of modernity, locales are unified...by that which is absent.” Social activity is spread across space, and influenced by relations at a distance (2008:8).

This further contributes to the “imagined cosmopolitanism” practiced by luchadores when they envision themselves as part of a world of wrestling using the internet and other communication forms. Schein describes this as a redistribution of identification in which both local practices and the “external foreignness” of global culture are structuring components (1994:149). As media flows into a place, desires flow out in “a metaphorical border crossing in the other direction” (Schein 1999:369). This metaphorical or virtual mobility allows for the imagining of horizontality as described by Anderson (1983:7), eradicating differentials of power and wealth. Imagined cosmopolitanism then is about a world of mobility—in terms of space, class, gender, and race (Schein 1999:369-370).

But, of course, the cosmopolitanism instantiated through Lady Blade’s participation in Bolivian lucha libre is not entirely imagined. The very presence of the character brings the distant into the context of the local. And in so doing, brings a global dimension to the local form of lucha libre. Though much work has been done of the consumption of goods as a form of cosmopolitanism (see Bodaar 2006, Calhoun 2002, Cannon and Yaprak 2002, Rojek 2000), Schein has noted that at times media is an important site of consumption rather than goods themselves. “One of the outcomes is that media consumers...come to imagine themselves as cosmopolitan participants” in global culture (1999:345). Lucha libre media flows into Bolivia from Mexico and the United States, but desires flow outward. Indeed, the primary desire of Super Catch luchadores is to quite literally flow outward either through visibility (on the internet or video), or through mobility to travel or work more permanently in other countries.

In Mexico, Levi writes that the use of English names in lucha libre references both modernity and exoticism (2008:73). In the case of Lady Blade, whiteness symbolized global cosmopolitanism, not in a general sense, but in the very specific association with the global

circuit of *lucha libre*. My presence represented both the exchange of media and mobility that Appadurai asserts constitutes the current era of global flows. However, as he explains, this does not mean that people live increasingly similar lives, but that they can imagine very different lives than the ones they currently have, hoping to “annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (1996:4). The presence of Lady Blade in the coloseo of Villa Victoria did not much change the actual practice of *lucha libre* that occurred there. The presence of a Norteamericana did not mean the pyrotechnics, jumbotrons, and plethora of consumer products such as action figures and t shirts associated with WWE suddenly appeared on the scene. Rather it created an opportunity for those present to imagine Bolivian *lucha libre* as part of a global phenomenon of wrestling and not just a local practice. My character allowed a re-positioning of both luchadores and audience members in relation to wrestling in far away places, and thus a shift in the stories “that people tell themselves about themselves in relation to others” (Rofel 1992:96).

But my presence did not just shift the stories of the wrestlers and audience. My participation, and all the symbolism tied up in it, were used as a form of capital. Super Catch was able to mobilize Lady Blade’s participation for economic gain and they attempted to convert the character into social capital. As advertisements for the events in which I appeared made clear, I was a main attraction. For my first event, one entire side of the flyer was dedicated to my match with Betty. This side of the flyer was headed by “Lucha Libre Internacional,” with our images and countries’ flags just beneath. Between the images of Lady Blade and Betty, seemingly squared off against each other (though in actuality, an effect created in photoshop), were our names and EE.UU. vs. Bolivia. Below all this were the logistics: date, time, and location. The other side of the flyer was a general advertisement, not mentioning any specific matches. It

featured the images of eighteen different luchador characters with the words “Super Catch: Esta noche comienza el desafío” [tonight the challenge begins], again with the logistics below.



Figure 23. Super Catch Flyer for 23 March, 2012



The reason my match with Betty was given its own side was not simply because we were women. In fact, Mercedes, whose likeness is not even present on the flyer, wrestled earlier in the evening. As the words, “internacional,” and “EE.UU.” attest, it was my global symbolism that was so important to the event. At least in the assumptions of Edgar and Jorge, who crafted the flyers, it was the international appeal that would draw the audience. This was also apparent in Edgar and Victor’s instructions to use “puro ingles” on television and during events, as well as television interviewers’ focus on the fact that I had come from the U.S. And it seemed to work. Audience members asked about the Norteamericana after all.

But Super Catch attempted to use this for two specific purposes. The first was to attract more audience members, because they pay for tickets. Given that I performed in every show Super Catch put on for the year, it would be hard to say whether my presence had any effect on ticket sales. But at every event in 2012, I heard at least one person ask about or comment on Lady Blade. That is not to say Lady Blade was the only luchador commented upon by the audience, but generally only the best and most experienced were known by name. For a newcomer to be a topic of conversation certainly indicated the advertisements were working. But secondly, and perhaps more importantly for most of the luchadores who were serious about continuing to wrestle, Lady Blade offered Super Catch the legitimacy associated with the international level of exhibition wrestling. And it was clear that Super Catch wrestlers were not the only luchadores in La Paz that understood the potential of Lady Blade. After my first match I was contacted via email by a trainer from Lucha Fuerza Extrema, offering his services. My identity was a secret, but I had spoken with the trainer the previous year, long before I started wrestling, and he logically concluded that the gringa who had asked him all sorts of questions for her thesis on lucha libre might be the same gringa who was now wrestling with Super Catch. The

message indicated he had seen a video of my first match, and that I had potential but had been poorly trained. He suggested I call him at my convenience to begin a better training regimen as soon as possible. I wrote back and graciously declined, having already developed a repertoire and rapport with Super Catch. But I suspected his motivation was not entirely selfless. There was money and status to be achieved with Lady Blade, and he wanted to be part of it.

Similarly, Juanita and I had been out of contact because of the birth of her second child, but when she learned from Roberto that I had started wrestling she immediately asked him to put us back in contact. When I called the new cell phone number that Roberto passed on from Juanita, her first question was if I'd like to wrestle against her. Apparently, having not seen the advertising or my actual matches with Betty, she suggested a Bolivia vs. US match as well. Since we had been friends for some time, I immediately agreed, though because of various logistical and timing issues, our planned match never came to fruition.

### Symbolic Femininity

It is, of course, impossible to say if a male wrestler from the United States would have been received in the same way as Lady Blade. Edgar often encouraged me to make connections between former FUW wrestlers and Super Catch in hopes of a true international exchange. But the confluence of the imagined cosmopolitanism of the United States and feminized beauty attributed to whiteness no doubt influenced my position as a white North American woman for both other luchadores and audience members. Schein discusses the consumption of Western women in China, in which they signify modernity, prosperity, liberation, freedom, individualism, democracy, progress, and femininity, possessing the wealth and power associated with whiteness (1994:143-144). She questions if Chinese enthrallment with Western women is incompatible with self-respecting nationalism or whether they might revitalize "Chineseness." Though she

eventually concludes that these questions are unimportant in the context of the ultimate truth: the white woman sells (1994:46), I believe it is precisely *because* the white woman sells that the presence of Lady Blade helps advance a self-respecting nationalism.

It is not just the Western woman who sells. As discussed in the previous chapter, the cholitas luchadoras sell to tourists in part because Andean women are more “Indian” than their male counterparts (de la Cadena 1995). While the white woman is symbolic of progress (Chow 1991:84), Andean women, like the Chinese women and other Third World women discussed by Chow, are expected to subordinate their own agenda to the national good (Chow 1991:88). As McClintock suggests, women are often positioned in subordinate forms of citizenship, only symbolically subsumed into the nation. “In such instances, women serve to represent the limits of national difference between men” (1991:105, see also Yuval Davis, Anthias, and Kofman 2005). Though Bolivian women have not been entirely excluded from citizenship (see Chapter 4) in the ways that McClintock explains for the women of South Africa (1991), Albrow (2000) points out that in recent years Bolivian women’s political participation often functions to bolster claims made by male politicians rather than serving their own aims.

Outside of politics, this is apparent in Bolivian wrestling, where some male Super Catch luchadores resent the cholitas luchadoras for hindering their own aspirations. The cholitas luchadoras are expected to draw crowds, but when they become more popular than the more “serious” or “dedicated” men, they are degraded as clowns. Sammond explains the position of female wrestlers in the United States as having to “struggle within and against their own object status” (2005:4). Though Bolivian luchadoras have found ways to capitalize on this object status, they still struggle with legitimacy among other Bolivian luchadores in the same way the men struggle for international legitimacy.

The cholitas luchadoras costumes and rhetoric mark them as symbolic of a certain form Bolivian femininity, while my mask marked me as symbolic of US femininity. The use of a mask in general allows the wrestler to become an icon more easily. Levi (1997) points to the examples of the famous Mexican luchador El Santo and the spokesman for the Asamblea de Barrios [Neighborhood Association] of Mexico City, Superbarrio. It has been posited that El Santo (along with several other larger than life Mexican luchadores) is a role that has actually been inhabited by several different men. Likewise, Superbarrio—dressed as a wrestler, with boots, cape, mask, and all—has certainly been inhabited by several different people. And it is this anonymity that allows them to achieve a larger than life status. As Levi writes, it is perhaps because of anonymity as “the only possible refuge from co-optation” that Superbarrio and his mask are able to “represent abstract fairness to a demoralized public” (1997:65).

But for women—both myself and the cholitas luchadoras—the confluence of anonymity (whether via masking or dressing as recognizable figure) and being a symbol of the nation doubly iconicizes. Indeed, as I continued to wrestle and contemplate the ways I was received by male luchadores, the cholitas luchadoras, and the audience, I realized Lady Blade had more in common with Bolivian luchadoras than I had originally thought. One day after a long training session with both Betty and Mercedes, I pondered in my fieldnotes, “Is the chola Other or am I?” And I concluded that we both were, sometimes in different contexts, but within wrestling all women were being highlighted as an Other. An unmarked woman as a wrestling character didn’t have the necessary salience. The cholitas luchadoras were representative of local authenticity, I was representative of the United States. Jennifer Dos Caras, the only Paceña luchadora that did not dress as a cholita character, even used a “loca” gimmick to appear as an Other. Though Fausto-Sterling contends in her discussion of Saartje Bartman that “the presentation of the exotic

requires a definition of the normal” (1995:30), neither the cholitas luchadoras nor Lady Blade were presented as unmarked. Instead all women stood in relief to the “normal” male wrestlers. And just as tourists desired the “difference” of the cholitas luchadoras because of their cosmopolitan capital, locals enjoyed my presence and performance because of the cosmopolitan symbolism I offered them.

This became clear in a story-line concocted about five minutes before I entered the ring in my second event. This time, I would begin wrestling Mercedes in a tag team match with my partner being Desertor (her real life husband) and her partner being Edgar (dressed as Gran Mortis this time). After a few minutes of Mercedes and I wrestling, the two men would enter the ring, and turn on us. With much shouting about men respecting women, Betty also entered the ring, along with Tony Montana, and the match became a three on three, men versus women brawl. In the end, after all three women got a chance to smash long florescent light tubes on Edgar’s back, we joined hands in the ring and declared women triumphant. The audience cheered, clearly happy with an alliance between técnica luchadoras against rudo male wrestlers. Though we women were representative of nations with very different imaginaries, the audience understood gender as a salient category capable of creating alliances across borders.

And our alliances were not just in the ring. The longer I trained and performed with Betty, Mercedes, and later with Claudia, I saw us as similarly using our gender to emphasize the ways in which we symbolized our respective communities. I also began to understand how becoming recognized—even as a symbol of a social order to which one does not fully subscribe or support—can be thrilling. Being asked to take pictures with children, overhearing audience members ask when the Norteamericana would be wrestling, and being interviewed by local television and radio producers gave me a real sense of pride. I knew that it was not because I was

one of the best wrestlers they had ever seen. But even with full realization that my appeal stemmed from the novelty rather than skill, I still enjoyed the attention.

### Gender and Nation

Michel de Certeau famously asserts that “What the map cuts up, the story cuts across” (1984:129). Indeed, the positionings of “locally authentic” cholitas luchadoras and the “globally cosmopolitan” Lady Blade seem to share little in common. But when seen in contrast, the two reveal a number of social truths. First, they reveal some of the ways women are used as nationalist symbols. Bolivian wrestling organizations are able to use the iconicity of the cholita to attract foreigners while using the iconicity of “the Western woman” to attract locals, making clear that women are easily positioned as symbols of nation in ways that men are rarely. Additionally, the presence of both Paceña women and a US woman in Bolivian lucha libre reveal how many audience members and local wrestlers understand the relationship between the two countries. Shein writes that in some performances, spectators and actors perform equally, and “what matters is the particular way that the performances become entangled in social interaction” (1999:371). The inclusion of Lady Blade allowed the luchadores of Super Catch to stake a claim to global legitimacy, while the audience’s positive reception affirmed this desire for the global cosmopolitan.

But perhaps most importantly, the relationship between nationalism and wrestling is not unidirectional. The extent that images and icons of nationality infuse wrestling is equaled by the ways that what happens in the wrestling ring creates notions of nationalism. The rhetoric of nationalism is created and sustained, indeed the nation itself is imagined and constituted performatively through cultural signification (Bhabba 1990, Conquergood 1994:212). It is not nationalism that inspires patriotic affiliation, but the ways affiliation is enacted (within wrestling

at times) that creates nationalism. And in the case of Lady Blade, cosmopolitan legitimacy is instantiated as a primary means of imagining the Bolivian nation, while reinforcing the iconicity of women as national symbols.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

When I began this research, there was already a small canon of journalistic accounts of the luchadoras. The New York Times, The Guardian, and National Geographic had already beat me to the punch (but not tijeras). I knew an anthropological approach would reveal deeper workings that could be covered in a 14-page photographic spread, but I wondered if I would really find anything new. The foreign newspaper articles that collectively framed the international sensation of the cholitas luchadoras concentrated on the women's empowerment, and changing social relations. These lenses were appealing to their readerships who viewed Bolivia much as it is portrayed in films and seen by the tourists who travel there: marginal, out of the way, exotic, and dangerous. These journalistic accounts appealed to popular conceptions of third world countries as backward. They are seen as places where women are abused and relegated to manual labor, where indigenous peoples live as they did before Pizarro set foot on South American land, but also where "modernity" is finally gaining a foothold and women are becoming more "empowered." These articles allowed readers in the global north to cheer on the cholitas from afar, not because they were good wrestlers, but because the characters the writers created through their words were the type of underdogs that liberal cosmopolitans like to see win.

Clearly, as my research took shape and I ended up spending far more time with male luchadores than the women who portray the cholitas luchadoras in the ring, I saw another side to this "feminist phenomenon." The cholitas luchadoras were very successful, not only appearing in media, but attracting foreign tourists to their matches and traveling abroad to wrestle or be interviewed. The men were resentful of the women's success. At first, I dismissed this as sexism, but as I spent more time, I began to see their perspectives as well. The feelings of the luchadores



reflect formations that Gill (2000) documented over a decade ago, in which the proliferation of NGOs in El Alto divided communities when some people capitalized on new opportunities and others were left with limited possibilities. The resentment of men who were similarly positioned confirmed that while expressive forms may be a method of disidentification (Muñoz 1999) or in the service of social change for some, those same forms may simultaneously reinforce the conditions within which others work, live, and perform.

It has been difficult at times to write this dissertation while maintaining a balanced view of what at times are opposing viewpoints on cholitas luchadoras characters. It is surprisingly difficult, given that I truly believe both sides of the story. I have tried to write in a way that does not create villains or hero(in)es. Because to me, both the men and women are “working” (Muñoz 1999:11, developed from Pêcheux 1982:158) the resources they have within a world that has granted neither group international mobility, stable economic situations, or social capital on par with the middle class North Atlantic citizens who read about them in the travel and leisure sections of their Sunday newspaper.

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In an attempt to move beyond the journalistic accounts of the cholitas luchadoras, I believed that understanding the ways indigenous people in Bolivia had historically been associated with violence was central to how audiences might interpret the performances. I intended to investigate the ways theatrical representations of violence impact the real world violence that marginalized populations experience. I wanted to understand how luchadoras and audience members co-constructed meanings of violence in performance within the social, political, and historical contexts of urban highland Bolivia. Yet, when listening to the luchadoras

and luchadores other themes came across with greater salience. Desires for international mobility and positive reputations abroad were the topics on which they all focused. But most interestingly, their particular ways of talking about these desires were very much influenced by their gendered experiences. Their abilities to utilize notions of tradition and modernity as based in local understandings, their attempts at validation as authentic or legitimate, and their access to modes of cosmopolitanism all hinged on the global. This dissertation then works at destabilizing three seemingly opposing axes of tension: tradition and modernity, authenticity and legitimacy, the local and the global.

### Local and Global

I hoped to understand the ways lucha libre reflected local politics and social institutions, but this project grew to be far more concerned with luchadores' position in the global. I began investigating the connections between performed violence and the real world violences of state power, poverty, and stigma, but the project evolved into an examination of the ways that the structural violences of global inequalities have created tensions within a community. This dissertation is now about the ways that globalization and cosmopolitanism, even as they come closer to a reality for certain groups, remain a dividing force: not between the "Developed World" and the "Developing World," but between individuals and small groups within the same communities.

Both the men and women of Bolivian lucha libre understand their global positionings as marginal (as discussed in Chapter 3), and their desires for exposure and legitimacy are very similar. Yet, because of the ways indigenous women have been iconized both within Bolivia and as a global trope of the "Third World Woman," some of the luchadoras' ways of working towards their cosmopolitan desires differ significantly from their male colleagues' and are far

more successful. As Dwight Conquergood asserts, “It is no longer easy to sort out the local from the global: transnational circulations of images get reworked on the ground and redeployed for local, tactical struggles” (2002:145). The luchadoras’ global success is a direct result of representing a local subjectivity, and the men’s dismissals of their performances follow closely from their desires to gain similar global notoriety.

Yet, their global successes are still inflected with forms of stratification that are rooted in local formations. They gain international mobility on temporary bases, but still live in the working-class neighborhoods of La Paz where their urban immigrant parents first settled. While in the ring, tourists recognize them as icons of indigenous Andean beauty, but on the street that beauty is subsumed to the prevailing standard of whiteness. The luchadoras’ access to cosmopolitan forms influences their experiences of daily life, but this access does not break down global stratification, or even social stratification on the local level. Rather the hegemonic propriety of the cosmopolitan inflects unevenly on the local landscape so that while the luchadoras highlight their claims to some cosmopolitan signifiers, the cosmopolitanism to which they aspire still retains an imaginary quality. They may appear on the Cristina Show in Miami (as discussed in Chapter 5), but it would still be shocking to many Paceños for a woman in pollera to host the morning talk shows like *La Revista* on which Super Catch luchadores appeared (as discussed in Chapter 3).

### Tradition and Modernity

Yet the men, who appear as “less Indian”—at least while in character—do not have access to the tropes on tradition that the cholitas luchadoras characters draw on (see Chapter 4). Instead, their characters represent the thoroughly modern luchador who is associated with mass media produced in the United States and Mexico. Though much anthropological work has

problematized notions of tradition and modernity, pointing out that they are interpreted differently by different individuals (Besnier 2004:9, Knauft 2002b, Pavis 1996:9), the concepts also operate as powerful anchor points for negotiating identification, behavior, and relations of power (Knauft 2002:131-134).

As the characters of the cholitas luchadoras make clear, tradition and modernity are part of the same continually changing interplay of political, economic, and historical forces (Guss 2006:15). The luchadoras gain access to forms of cosmopolitan modernity through the portrayal of iconic tradition. Rather than modernity swallowing up the traditional unidirectionally and irreversibly, “modern” forms of behavior, identification, and relating often rework tradition in ways that strengthen its symbolic power.

For the luchadoras, the modern performance venue of lucha libre gave visibility to the traditional icon of the chola, extending its global visibility, reinforcing its local significance, and reworking the real-life subjectivities associated with it. Benita, with her cellphone pictures, and green nail polish brilliantly summed it up when she told me “we are modern cholitas” (see Chapter 5). Notions of tradition and modernity are newly created with each performance and mundane act, and new contexts produce new forms of tradition.

### Authenticity and (II) Legitimacy

All traditions are by their nature selective, and are often utilized by powerful actors to naturalize asymmetric relations of power (Williams 1977:115-120). As Guss writes, the success of these strategies is evident in the frequency with which local groups incorporate authenticating discourses into their self-representations (2006:15). Yet, what counts as “traditional” or “authentic” often becomes a source of debate. While the luchadoras, many audience members, and the international journalistic community that continues to feature them see the chola

characters as authentic, some male luchadores and audience members disparage them as an illegitimate use of symbolism for a gimmick (as discussed in Chapter 3).

While it is easy to read the Super Catch luchadores' complaints as mere jealousy, these tensions are more deeply about competing notions of authenticity. In some interpretations, while the cholitas luchadoras remain authentic Andean icons, the luchadoras' expressive enactments relegate them to performing *lucha libre* of inferior quality. In other readings, their "clowning" performances in the wrestling ring negate their authenticity as indigenous women. But for still others, the cholitas luchadoras represent a unique contribution to wrestling: authentically local at the same time as legitimately skilled wrestlers. Rather than erasing authenticity, they are "inaugurating new authenticities not dependent on tradition or translation" (Boellstorf 2003:237).

The luchadoras—and particularly their use of chola characters—make clear the ways that authenticities may be multiple. Much as conceptions of identity have been given much attention and critique, authenticity must not be considered monolithic, static, or enduring. Rather, the multiplicity, simultaneity, instability, discord, and co-constitution of authenticity also deserve attention. This is particularly clear in contrasting local audience reactions to the luchadoras with those of foreign tourists. Locals often see no contradiction in a woman in "traditional" dress participating in a phenomenon that not only takes its lineage from foreign sources, but is now enmeshed in the flows of globally produced media. Similarly, the luchadoras themselves often speak of their new cosmopolitan positioning as an avenue for demonstrating the ways that authentically indigenous women may participate in the global flows that characterize the current era of economic and social processes. Yet foreign viewers, still retaining a sense of imperialist nostalgia, understand this juxtaposition as diminishing the power of representations of authenticity (see Chapter 5).

These differing expectations of purity and timelessness as an aspect of authenticity then map onto global inequalities. Many in the Global North understand authenticity from a site of privilege, allowing them to retain of sense of authenticity as both pristine and removed from the complexities of historic and social processes. Yet as Abu-Lughod writes, “One should be suspicious when neat cultural icons are plastered over messier cultural and historic narratives” (2002:785). Those who experience cosmopolitanism as an imaginary, even as they move closer toward making it a reality, understand the ways in which their own subject positions are always flexibly accumulated. Their worlds are constructed through historical and political processes, and the remnants of these processes are not contradictory to notions of authenticity. As the incongruity of most Bolivians’ knowledge of the US and many US citizens’ (lack of) knowledge about Bolivia makes clear (see Chapter 6), those who experience globalization from the periphery understand the world as one of multiple accumulations and layered or intermeshed phenomena in ways that those who view themselves as the center of global flows do not. Thus, these views of authenticity reveal how global flows not only contribute to multiplicity, but also to differing conceptions of authenticity between what may be experienced as the center and periphery.

#### Passion, Religion, Jokes, and Originality

While attending a LIDER event in 2011, one Paceño man summed up for me the position of Bolivian lucha libre in a global context.

Ahora [la lucha] es una vergüenza por el plagio de personajes y parafernalia y las cholitas son nuestro único y verdadero aporte a este deporte... Bueno quizás es el mejor deporte que hay, pues es pasión en México, es religión en Japón, y es una broma en los Estados Unidos. Y aquí por desgracia ha sufrido un horrible estancamiento y falta obvia de creatividad...falta ver las promociones, los bookers, guiones e historias, los personajes plagiados de México y los Estados Unidos...pero [las cholitas luchadoras] obviamente es nuestro aporte al mundo del pancracio.

Now wrestling is a shame because of plagiarism of characters and costumes, and the cholitas luchadoras are our only true contribution to this sport. Well maybe it's the greatest sport there, it's a passion in Mexico, religion in Japan, and a joke in the United States. And here unfortunately, it has suffered horrible stagnation and clear lack of creativity...It lacks vision of the promoters and the bookers. Scripts, stories, and characters are plagiarized from Mexico and the United States...but the cholitas luchadoras are obviously our contribution to the world of wrestling.

This man positioned Bolivian lucha libre as inferior to wrestling in other countries. It is “a shame.” “It lacks vision.” But he also reflected the desires of the Super Catch luchadores, to gain footing among countries with strong wrestling traditions such as Mexico, Japan, and the United States. Yet he viewed the cholitas luchadoras, much as they saw themselves: as the Bolivia’s “contribution to the world of wrestling.” This spectator’s assessment reflects a number of ways that lucha libre stands in for and conditions the ways different individuals understand their relationships with each other, with the world, and with institutions of power.

Lucha libre is a hybrid sport-performance, a fusion of genres that are sometimes dismissed as superstructural, pop cultural, or superficial manifestations that do not speak to the important concerns of individuals, groups, or societies. Yet, my hope is that this dissertation makes clear the ways that entertaining pastimes are ultimately embedded within and demonstrative of the overriding trends of society, and may offer profound perspectives for understanding how people truly experience their position within economic process, historical contexts, and social change. As Kondo suggests, activities of recreation and popular culture can “motivate a cultural politics that makes a difference” (1997:9). The forms of pleasure in peoples’ lives have profound power over the ways they view the world in which they live. They structure understandings of relative positioning in the world and desires for how that positioning might change.

This dissertation tells the story of the different ways gendered, raced, and localized bodies take on meaning within global circulations of media, people, and desires. It reveals one

way that individual lives are impacted by the global assemblages that increasingly dominate relationships between people. Yet, rather than focusing solely on the ways people make money, and reproduce the means of through which they survive, I concentrate on the parts of these people's lives that bring them pleasure, and the activities about which they are passionate.



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