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## UnBolivable Bouts: Gender and Essentialisation of Bolivia's Cholitas Luchadoras

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### Introduction

Every Sunday, around 4 pm, the wrestling show begins in the Multipurpose Arena of El Alto, just outside of La Paz, Bolivia. It usually begins with two men dressed in spandex unitards and full head masks, or perhaps like a werewolf or mummy. They throw each other around the ring doing flips from the ropes in the process. Eventually, one pins the other for a count of three. There may be two or three more matches like this, but then the real audience favourites enter the ring. The 'Cholitas Luchadoras' step out of the dressing room to local cumbia music and take a few laps around the stage dancing and flirting with the audience. They dress similar to Bolivian folkloric dancers wearing simple sweaters, dainty shoes and their most distinguishing feature – calf length full-layered skirts, locally called *polleras* (see Figure 17.1).

Sometimes two women enter the ring, and on other occasions a woman confronts one of the male wrestlers in a typical *lucha libre* bout. *Lucha libre* is a form of exhibition wrestling (sometimes called 'professional wrestling') which involves practiced moves mixed with melodramatic or humorous storylines. *Lucha libre* is popular throughout Latin America, but roughly 25 Bolivian luchadoras have a unique gimmick. By dressing in the folkloric style known as *de pollera*, they index both indigenous identity dating back to the colonial era and the *pollera's* association with women's historical involvement in protest movements in Bolivia. Yet, it is the beauty and 'traditional' symbolism of their costumes and characters that has struck audiences and journalists alike. It has also been the catalyst for the popularity of the 'Cholitas Luchadoras', a moniker which itself can be interpreted in multiple ways. 'Cholita', is the diminutive of 'chola', a word for an urban indigenous woman that was historically disparaging, but has been increasingly used in a neutral manner and in limited cases reclaimed. The



Figure 17.1 Two of the Cholitas Luchadoras wrestle in El Alto  
Photo by Harjant Gill.

diminutive 'cholita', then, is usually (but not always) an affectionate name for indigenous women. Thus, advertising the events as featuring 'Cholitas Luchadoras' is an attempt to attract a larger audience and specifically tourists by emphasising the exotic nature of indigenous women.

I first read about the luchadoras in a Peruvian newspaper in 2005 and, shortly thereafter, read an article about them in the *New York Times* (Forero, 2005). In subsequent years, they appeared in a 14-page *National Geographic* photo spread (Guillermoprieto, 2008), a piece in *The Guardian* accompanied by an online video (Schipani, 2008), as a challenge for participants in the television programme *The Amazing Race* (2008, Season 13, Leg 3), in a 2011 episode of the History Channel's *IRT Deadliest Roads*, in three foreign documentary films (*The Fighting Cholitas*, Jobrani, 2006; *Mamachas del Ring*, Park, 2009; *Cholita Libre*, Richter and Holtz, 2010) and in countless newspaper and magazine articles throughout South America.

It is not just the fact that there are women wrestling, or even that they are wrestling against men, that has attracted so much attention. Instead, luchadoras' characters representing indigenous women are usually the focus. Every foreign press article I have read draws attention to their performances of indigeneity. Forero's *New York Times* article 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.' Similarly, Carroll and Schipani (2008) in *The Guardian* suggest the luchadoras' performances, are part of a

macho sport in a macho country...[and] have 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.

This description in particular provides an example of the ways journalists have used the women's indigeneity as a form of exoticism, as well as evidence of their increasing empowerment.

Sport has often been characterised as a source of empowerment for Native peoples. Forsyth and Wamsley (2006) have shown the way the North American Indigenous Games were used to develop under-represented athletes and promote cultural values. As Hallinan and Judd (2013) confirm, sport offers potential for social change within indigenous communities, and academic literature has historically framed indigenous athletes as heroic figures that fight both on the field and for indigenous rights (e.g. Tatz, 1995). Yet, they acknowledge Ngā and Hokowhitu's (2013) emphasis that this narrative revalidates colonial logics through promoting European-influenced ideas about empowerment. 'The "production" of indigenous sports people as colonial citizens, as freedom fighters is no simple story' (Ngā and Hokowhitu, 2013, p. xxi), thus focus on local context is essential.

Similarly, it is common for women's sports to be understood as a source of empowerment, due to disruption of gender ideologies that portray women as physically or emotionally weaker than men, thus creating 'an arena that helps women to question the culture they live in' (McCaughey, 1997, p. xi). Though authors such as McCaughey caution that this form of empowerment does not erase institutionalised oppression, it does 'compliment the mobility and freedom sought by feminist artists, performers, activists, and philosophers' (1997, p. xi). Yet, other researchers, such as Lafferty and McKay, have found that empowerment due to combat sports is only limited because women are constrained by structures of labour, power and representation (2004, p. 273).

These same domains of labour, power and representation also complicate the extent to which the luchadoras' performances are empowering. The spectacular nature of performed violence is combined with visual icons of indigeneity so that the luchadoras strategically use the exoticisation of indigenous women to sell tickets to both local and foreign audience members. This popularity has given the luchadoras heightened social capital in forms of fame within their own neighbourhoods, along with international exposure resulting from features in highly circulated photos, magazines and documentary films (see Haynes, 2013a for further discussion).

While their performances empower individual women on some levels, the format of the 'Cholitas Luchadoras' relies on a script of *indigenismo* in which cultural discourses value indigenous peoples for their display of certain symbols of indigeneity such as music, dancing and clothing (Rockefeller, 1999, p. 133), but politically relegate them to the margins, often as part of nation-building projects (Bigenho, 2006, p. 267). So, while the luchadoras themselves benefit in certain ways from their participation in lucha libre, the broader impacts of their performances may serve to maintain the overall position of indigenous women in Bolivian society. Uncritical suggestions that indigenous women's participation in lucha libre is empowering simply ignore such ideologies as well as those that have historically stigmatised them as dirty, uncivilised and violent.

Given this context, I suggest that the impacts of the luchadoras' performances might be less progressive than what journalistic accounts describe. In this chapter, I discuss the ideology of *indigenismo* and how it frames the practice of lucha libre in Bolivia, as it melds violence and theatrical performance. I then outline the historical context of icons of indigeneity in Bolivia, including the *pollera* as a symbol of protest, as well as the 'cholita', paying careful attention to the ways they are represented in the wrestling ring. Looking at both the luchadoras' own assessments of their wrestling performances and that of the audience members, I analyse the impact of this phenomenon in the context of *indigenismo* and the violent nature of lucha libre.

This chapter is based on the fieldwork I undertook while living in La Paz between 2009 and 2013, during which I attended wrestling matches and conducted interviews with audiences, male and female luchadores, trainers and lucha libre promoters (see Haynes, 2013b). As part of participant observation, I trained with the lucha libre group, Super Catch, and eventually performed with them on television and more live events. Based on my experiences, I conclude that the 'Cholitas Luchadoras' allow for the collapsing of all indigenous women into an icon of indigeneity, while simultaneously reinforcing local elites' long-held stereotypes of indigenous peoples as violent. The performances then play directly into forms of *indigenismo* by iconising and exoticising indigenous women, therefore diminishing the political power of protest and relegating violent social movements to apolitical spectacle. In essence, the luchadoras' performances are too easily exoticised and stigmatised to represent an unproblematic example of empowerment through combat sport.

### **Indigenismo and violence in the ring**

It is tempting to see the luchadoras' performances as news media depicts them. Journalists and anthropologists, as well as many of their readers, enjoy discovering that traditionally subaltern people, and particularly women,

have asserted themselves amid dire constraints. This lens relies on narratives of Bolivia as marginal, backward and exotic. It paints Bolivia as a country where women are abused and relegated to manual labour, where indigenous people live as they did before conquistadores set foot on South American land, but also where 'modernity' is finally gaining a foothold and women are becoming more 'empowered'.

This type of story is easily corroborated with glowing accounts of Bolivia's president Evo Morales, who is sometimes known as a champion of environmentalism, socialism and indigenous rights. Morales has sponsored constitutional reforms that guarantee indigenous groups more autonomy and political participation, as well as appointing a number of indigenous women to political office. The 'Cholitas Luchadoras', then, are portrayed as part of a growing trend of increased empowerment for indigenous people in Bolivia and for indigenous women, in particular. However, to take this assessment at face value is to accept that the reforms sponsored by Morales are having a significant impact on indigenous peoples' lives and, more to the point, that the luchadoras are advancing social roles for all indigenous women.

Yet, a closer look at the context of the 'Cholitas Luchadoras' reveals that the performances may actually reflect the ideology of *indigenismo* that proliferated in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1950s, the National Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario, or MNR) gained power through rebellion and thereafter championed *mestizaje*, or racial mixing, as the means of crafting pan-racial national unity (Rios, 2010, p. 283). Within *mestizaje*, indigeneity was seen as a 'primitive form condemned to disappear with the rapid processes of modernisation' (Albó, 1994, p. 53). Indigenous people were recast as *campesinos*, roughly 'peasants', and indigenous culture became glorified, but only as folklore. While class became an organising principle and was promoted as a legitimate form of identification, race was symbolically transformed into folklore in the service of nationalism (Bigenho, 2006, p. 269). Canessa (2006, p. 245) writes that a new nationalism was forged through folklore festivals and teaching folkloric dances in schools. 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 indigenous songs in the elite theatres of Bolivian cities. Under different circumstances, elite classes would never have accepted these genres as entertainment (Bigenho, 2006). But, as Poole (1990, p. 122) suggests, when most audience members do not share similar lived experiences as those who regularly engage in folkloric performances, staging them may serve a regulating function rather than celebrate indigenous heritage. Bigenho (2006, p. 283) confirms that even as indigenous performances were seen as a source of national pride, this by no means constituted an end to racism.

Yet, journalistic writing about the 'Cholitas Luchadoras,' as well as the luchadoras themselves, place their performances in the tradition of

*indianismo*, which emerged as a critique of the exclusionary politics of *indigenismo* and involved projects in which 'authentic' indigenous people reclaimed ownership of their history and culture (Favre, 1998, p. 11). Yet, as Bigenho (2006, p. 270) points out, earlier forms of *indigenismo* grew out of elites' fears of indigenous peoples' violence following revolts at the end of the nineteenth century. Incorporation of indigenous expression within a nationalist cultural project alleviated fears of indigenous violence, thereby divorcing them from the political power of protest and revolutionary violence. These performances of wrestling, then, equally have the potential to divorce political potency from seemingly empowering performances of violence.

To understand this relationship between indigeneity and violence in the wrestling ring, clarifying violent and performative aspects of *lucha libre* is essential. Bolivian *lucha libre* was developed in the 1960s from Mexican forms of the sport. Like most exhibition wrestling, *lucha libre* incorporates elements of performance rather than exemplifying pure athletic competition. Sometimes matches have predetermined winners and choreographed moves, and referees do not always enforce regulations. Often the wrestling action involves bodily humour or other comedy. Though there is an air of athletic competition and athleticism is essential to the event, audiences usually understand that wrestling incorporates aspects of theatrical performance.

However, simply viewing wrestling as spectacle ignores the centrality of violence to wrestling performances. Simply put, 'wrestling is brutal and it is carnal. It is awash in blood, sweat, and spit, and... depends on the match – the violent and sensual meeting of human flesh in the ring' (Sammond, 2005, p. 7). But as Barthes suggests, violence in wrestling is important because of the ways it reflects tensions in real social relationships (2005, p. 27, see also Jenkins, 2007, p. 84). Cultural discourses on indigeneity, in many ways, provide such a relationship. Given the *luchadoras'* explicit use of indigenous characters, forms of violence associated with indigenous peoples throughout Bolivia's history are implicitly connected to the violence of wrestling performances.

Indigeneity – as both a self-identification and an imposed form of subjectivity – has been instantiated through various means since 1538 when Spanish colonists arrived in the area that is now Bolivia. The Spanish colonial government consolidated diverse indigenous peoples into a single devalued racial category of 'Indian'. Under the Spanish system, residents were separated into three castes: white *criollos*, mixed *mestizos* and *indios*. Within this system, *indios* were considered to be culturally stagnated (Wade, 1997, p. 27) and thus were given protection in exchange for labour and tribute (Hylton and Thomson, 2007, p. 36).

The artificial category of *indio* became increasingly arbitrary as members of different groups intermarried and both native and Spanish people migrated

between rural and urban areas (Larson, 2004, p. 30). These factors complicated designations between the three castes based on ancestry, and ways of performing such as language, dress and food came to define who belonged to what category (Klein, 2003, p. 50).

As such, identifying as *indio* and invoking an Incan ancestry was important in resistance movements against the colonial government. The performance of indigeneity was particularly important in the 1781 revolution led by such leaders as Tomás Katari, Túpac Amaru and Túpac Katari, whose very names were borrowed from former Inca monarchs. Though these leaders, along with Bartolina Sisa, never successfully overthrew the colonial government, they laid groundwork for an eventual revolution. Further, as Hylton and Thomson (2007, p. 19) point out, the symbolism invoked in these resistance movements recast indigenous subjectivity through political consciousness, the use of necessary violence and realisation of indigenous people's roles as historical agents.

When Bolivia finally gained independence in 1825, it was primarily through the efforts of *criollos*, and the lives of indigenous peoples did not change drastically. Simon Bolívar, a *criollo*, became first president of the Republic. He was adamant about turning 'Indians' into 'Bolivians', yet did not grant the rights or status of citizenship to indigenous people who made up nearly two-thirds of the population (Hylton and Thomson, 2007, pp. 47–48). Hylton and Thomson have referred to this formation as 'nationality without citizenship'. Under such ideology, elites envisioned a future in which Indians would share equal rights and benefits of citizenship, but only through ceasing to identify with indigenous ancestry and culture (2007, pp. 47–48) which were associated with resistance to innovation and progress (Choque and Mamani, 2001, p. 204). This ideology remained even during the MNR's government with its promotion of indigenous heritage without indigenous political participation.

This strategy never effectively eliminated political participation by indigenous people as such, and in December 2005 Bolivian citizens elected the first indigenous president in their history, Evo Morales. For many indigenous Bolivians, Morales has been made into an 'icon of indigeneity' (Goldstein and Castro, 2006, p. 383). At least on the surface, his policies tend to favour and support the indigenous majority of the country.<sup>1</sup> Though he has actively proceeded with an agenda of 'de-colonisation' and 'de-neoliberalisation', Bolivia is still experiencing the effects of neo-liberal economic measures imposed by the US government and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in the 1980s and 1990s. Based on ideologies that privileged economic liberalism and privatisation, structural adjustment effectively forced thousands of government workers out of jobs, cut social services and privatised natural resources. This economic crisis disproportionately affected rural areas, lower classes and people of indigenous origins (Kohl, 2002, p. 449).

Kohl argues that these transformations resulted in the territorialisation of opposition to privatisation and economic policies, in many cases reinforcing social movements (2002, p. 449). Privatisation of resources created unsustainable formations in which citizens could not afford basic survival needs, leading to such manifestations as the Water War of 2000 and Gas War of 2003. Many such protest movements resulted in state violence physically enacted on the bodies of protestors, or widespread civic violence. Further, government cutbacks often resulted in a lack of law enforcement, meaning community justice (sometimes referred to disparagingly as vigilantism) became more common (Goldstein, 2004; Lazar, 2008, p. 61). Taken together, these neo-liberal configurations – job termination, privatisation and social service cuts – served to increase opposition to the government among those most negatively affected and as a result magnified the characterisations of indigenous people as marginal and violent.

For elite and middle-class Paceños, who usually identify as non-indigenous, these types of violence are mostly located in somewhat distant marginal neighbourhoods of La Paz. Yet, there is potential that violence could erupt during the protest marches that are frequently organised in downtown areas. Though a topic of jokes, it is obvious that an element of fear remains. 'Another day, another protest, another dynamite', quipped an elite Paceaña woman whom I knew through University connections, as she drove me home past a protest in her new Mercedes SUV. These protests are perceived to be more nuisance than 'scary', but still reinforce the fact that a discourse of violence remains deeply ingrained in elite consciousness about class and race.

Though disparaged by elites and middle-class Paceños, for unions of transportation workers, miners, teachers and even rank-and-file police officers, protest is not only necessary for political and economic demands but also a source of pride. These people, as well as those practicing community justice in the context of absent state regulation, proudly see these assertive acts as part of the history of Katari and Amaru, and all those indigenous Bolivians before and after, who have forced their political voices when government bodies did not want to listen.

### **The *pollera* in performance**

Indigenous women have been among these protestors since colonial times, and the *pollera* has been an icon of their involvement. The *pollera* is not just a skirt, but a 'document' of aesthetic, religious, social and material value (Presta, 2010, p. 52; see also Phipps, 2004, p. 17). It is based on sixteenth-century provincial Spanish women's style (Jones, 2007, p. 30), but became popular in Bolivia among indigenous urban women in the eighteenth century as a way to differentiate themselves from rural women (Gill, 1993). These urban women were instrumental in forming the markets in cities,



and *polleras* referenced an elevated status associated with economic activity (Presta, 2010, pp. 42–43).

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the *pollera* began to be associated with certain political stances as well. With women's involvement in anarchist syndicates in La Paz, the association between the *pollera* and protest first became widely recognised around 1900 (Lehm and Rivera Cusicanqui, 1988). Seligman calls *pollera*-clad market vendors 'legendary figures of working-class political solidarity' (1993, p. 202). During the 1920s and 1930s, women in general were becoming more politicised around issues of education, work and suffrage, but working-class women who were likely to wear *polleras* placed emphasis obtaining full citizenship rights and used these claims to argue for improved working conditions (Stephenson, 1999, p. 29). They introduced demands for organised childcare, literacy courses, library resources and cultural events aimed at Aymara women (Stephenson, 1999, p. 11).

While Bolivians were well aware of the connections between the *pollera* and politics, it was not until the 1980s that the idea of the *pollera* as a symbol of resistance was popularised among academics. A number of works were produced focusing on women's union involvement and their use of traditional dress to claim public recognition of citizenship (Lehm and Rivera, 1988; Wadsworth and Dibbits, 1989). However, as Sologuren (2006, p. 87) points out, these studies presented a homogenous image of working-class women, as subaltern, constantly conflicting with the upper classes, and without internal conflicts of their own. Throughout these eras, not everyone saw the *pollera* as a sign of resistance. As Sologuren reminds us, competing understandings of the *pollera* often split along geographic lines, with urban working-class sectors understanding it 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 women wearing *polleras* involved in protest. Much as de la Cadena (2001, p. 21) writes of Peru, clothing expressing indigenous identification is often worn symbolically within social movements. For many Bolivians, the *pollera* represents political action and its wearer is considered to be a powerful agent of liberation (Wadsworth and Dibbits, 1989, p. 2). Thus, the *pollera* is a symbol not only of indigeneity but of political and social empowerment as well.

Weismantel writes that the *pollera* 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, p. 130). As wrestling often models its storylines and characters on existing social relationships, the association between the *pollera* and women who are assertive while 'fighting' for rights allows some viewers to see the wrestling ring as a natural extension

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of social protest and, thus, the *pollera* as suitable attire for women in the wrestling ring.

However, it was not the long history of politically involved Bolivian women that inspired the characters of the 'Cholitas Luchadoras', but instead was a humorous and exoticised representation of indigenous women. The introduction of women into the wrestling rings of La Paz happened sometime in the 1990s, but they attracted little attention until the early 2000s when they began wrestling in *polleras*. Veteran wrestler and current trainer Ben Simonini told me that at this time he was a DVD vendor and some of his most popular sales were videos of the Mexican television programme *La India María*. 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 create cholita characters for wrestling.

This origin story, whether true or embellished, reveals some of the tensions between empowerment and exoticism that the 'Cholitas Luchadoras' reflect. *La India María* was a character developed by María Elena Velasco for Mexican television and film that later spread throughout the Americas. In the programme, Velasco portrayed the character of María, which was based on Mazahua women who migrated to Mexico City from nearby rural areas in the 1960s. The character of *India María* has been criticised for portraying indigenous women as naïve, clumsy and overwhelmed by 'modern' life (Rohrer, 2009). She was illiterate and spoke broken Spanish. With her indigenous Mexican clothing, the character closely resembled the *pollera* style, and her form of comedy shared qualities with the 'Cholitas Luchadoras' performances, relying on physical humour and overacted facial expressions. When such portrayals of essentialised identities are enacted by those who are essentialised, Desmond (1999) contends this often reinforces the naturalisation of difference.

In the current context of the wrestling ring, the *luchadoras* deliberately embody representations of indigenous women. Through their physical performances, costumes and characters, the *luchadoras* personally gain both economic and social capital. Wrestling has given the *luchadoras* access to forms of cosmopolitanism unimaginable to indigenous women two decades ago. Though their income from matches is modest, they have gained privilege that comes with local fame and international mobility that comes from foreign media attention. Many of the *luchadoras* now occupy very different subjectivities in relation to their local communities and a globalised world, because of their involvement in *lucha libre*.

This is not to say that they are maliciously perpetuating stereotypes for their own gains and sacrificing others in the process. Nor are their naïve players in someone else's game. They realise their popularity as *luchadoras*,

and perhaps the popularity of Bolivian *lucha libre* as a whole, is directly related to the exoticised 'Cholitas Luchadoras' characters that they perform. As in all forms of strategic essentialism, the luchadoras' decisions to use their perceived racial authenticity towards certain aims represent a pragmatic assertion of identity categories for advancing interests in the public domain (Spivak, 1988, p. 205). Though I argue that these interests may actually run counter to political claims for a wider group, not everyone agrees about the broader efficacy of these strategies.

### Performance interpretation

One could easily conclude from these circumstances that either wrestling advances the luchadoras' social capital and is a form of *indianismo* resisting erasure and empowering indigenous peoples or, conversely, the circumstances under which they wrestle serve to essentialise indigenous culture in ways that actually reinforce stigmas of violence and disempower by reproducing ideologies of *indigenismo*. What seems to make the difference is the relationship one has to the performances as well as their social standing and background.

Wrestling shows in La Paz are deeply classed events; most devoted *lucha libre* fans hail from working-class areas of the city and thus have backgrounds similar to the luchadoras who portray chola characters in the ring. Some women in the audience wear *polleras* on a daily basis. Such audience members speak from the position of the lived experience of indigenous people – those who the luchadoras claim to represent and empower.

The luchadoras themselves almost invariably suggest that they see their performances as empowering for these Bolivians. 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 also making a local and personal impact for some women.

Juanita la Cariñosa, one of the most popular luchadoras in La Paz, told me, 'To be a wrestler means that there's no shame or racism.' Further, it empowers through positive examples:

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 luchadoras are role models, Juanita suggests the luchadoras represent a form of 'modernity' to which rural people should aspire.

I met several audience members as well, who echoed the pride and hope Carmen Rosa describes. Some audience members I spoke with agreed that the luchadoras were good role models, and many of the young girls in the audience certainly treated them as such, asking for autographs or to take pictures with them. One man even told me, 'The cholitas luchadoras are [Bolivia's] only true contribution to this sport.'

Yet, not all audience members agree that the luchadoras have had a positive impact. Many suggested that the luchadoras used symbols of indigeneity without respect for their history. One young man that I met at an event told me, 'I don't like the luchadoras much because to me they seem like a lack of respect to Bolivian women.' As others explained, 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 the public image of indigenous women.

Because lucha libre fans are so commonly from working-class areas, events are never staged in wealthy neighbourhoods. Most elite Paceños have never seen a live lucha libre match, but they have certainly noticed the popularity of the 'Cholitas Luchadoras', and their commentary is just as revealing as that of audience members. Most suggest that it is either too violent for their tastes or too ridiculous.

A middle-aged man named Álvaro told me one night over beers in an upscale bar that he never liked lucha libre because he 'haaaates violence'. He called it silly and offensive before repeating again how much he hated violence. Countless others were more flippant with dismissive statements like 'Oh, I don't know, I don't like things with violence' or 'I don't understand why people like such violent things.' Yet, boxing and Ultimate Fighting Championship bouts are quite popular among people of this background, and I have seen both displayed on televisions in the most elite restaurants and bars of La Paz. In fact, many upper-class Paceños are particularly proud of Bolivian female boxer Jennifer Salinas, as reflected by her boxing nickname, 'The Bolivian Queen'. On the other hand, wrestling such as that of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) of the United States and Lucha Libre AAA from Mexico are scoffed at as ridiculous. The main difference between these forms of combat sport is of course that the former 'pure' athletic contests focused on determining a winner, while exhibition wrestling's popularity is in large part due to its performative aspects.

Much like violence, performative aspects of wrestling such as character development, storylines, and melodrama are evaluated as gratuitous, stigmatising the event and performers. This gratuitousness qualifies *lucha libre* as a 'genre of excess' a term Linda Williams uses to explain film genres that have a particularly low cultural status – horror, pornography and melodrama (1991, p. 4). These films, rather than appealing to elite classes as 'high art', are seen to be for the less educated, less 'cultured' masses. The overt violence of *lucha libre*, not to mention the more subtle aspects of intimate bodily contact and melodramatic storylines (Levi, 1997), reflects the gratuitousness of these genres.

For elites, the stigma associated with wrestling, is not entirely about violence, but depends heavily on its framing and the people performing. It is the performance of indigeneity – and more specifically, a caricatured form of indigeneity – that is evaluated as distasteful. Yet, this overt performativity is not enough to disassociate the events from the political protests that originally stigmatised indigenous women as violent.

The history of *indigenismo* provides what Diana Taylor (2003, p. 28) calls a 'scenario', in which context acts as a metaphorical guide for understanding the performance. For her, narratives of performance rely on plots, gestures, attitudes and tones that are familiar to the performers and audience, thus endowing the performance with localised meaning. These familiar aspects simultaneously set up the narrative and provide the action. Physical location, embodiment of actors and formulaic structures suggest or circumscribe certain possibilities of meaning (Taylor, 2003, pp. 29–32). In this case, the *luchadoras* see their popularity as an opportunity to act as positive role models for indigenous women's empowerment, thereby providing an alternative to apolitical forms of folkloric performance. Yet, others read the events as representing indigeneity simplistically or even ridiculously through spectacular performance and do not see potential for meaningful empowerment in realms such as politics. Indeed, even within the 'scenario' of *indigenismo*, interpretations vary and the potential for empowerment remains contested.

### Touristic interpretations

*Indigenismo* of the twentieth century was a project often aimed at representation to foreign audiences, and this is important in the case of the 'Cholitas *Luchadoras*' as well. Indeed, the ways tourists interpret 'Cholitas *Luchadoras*' performances may be even more helpful in understanding the connections between *lucha libre* and *indigenismo*. Because of tour company advertising and international media attention, foreign tourists are now common at *lucha libre* events in La Paz. One particular group, *Titanes del Ring*, usually garners about 150 tourists among their audience of 500 each week. Though the histories of *indigenismo* and indigenous violence are not necessarily salient for these audience members, pervasive in their comments

is a sense of folklore divorced from real indigenous people's lives. This is not entirely a question of imperialist nostalgia wherein agents of colonialism, or in this case travellers conceiving of a place in neo-imperialist terms, feel nostalgia for a place as it was 'traditionally' before being corrupted by globalising forces (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 69). Rather, they are guided into these perceptions. Daniela, the operator of Andean Secrets, a tourism company that promotes Titanes del Ring, told me it is one of the bestselling 'tours' because they promote it as a 'local spectacle'. Experiencing something new and different appealed to foreign audience members, and highlighting the women's indigeneity allowed Daniela, Titanes del Ring and the luchadoras themselves to dramatically raise ticket sales for tourists.

Much like the *indigenismo* of the early twentieth century, Andean Secrets promotes this form of 'indigenous culture' from a distance. Though identifying as indigenous in La Paz is not necessarily as tied to class as in many other Latin American contexts, Daniela and most of her employees are members of the upper middle class. While it would not be strange for people of this class to participate in folkloric dances on holidays, have their homes blessed by *Yatiris* [Aymara medicine men] or even give offerings to the *Pachamama* [Earth Mother], these observances of indigenous culture are not understood in the same way as wearing a *pollera* on a daily basis or involvement with indigenous rights groups. Their lived experience of indigeneity does not include discrimination or stigma, and thus, the ways in which the events are promoted very much reflects the values of *indigenismo* in that they, in some ways, 'speak for indigenous subjects without including them' (Bigenho, 2006, p. 267).

The most visible way the events are advertised by Andean Secrets is through the full-colour posters that announce in English, 'Unique!!! Cholitas Wrestling. Only in Bolivia. Unboliviable.' The poster, and nearly identical palm-sized flyers (see Figure 17.2), 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.

While the advertisements use sensationalist language, it was the cartoon graphic that was particularly striking for tourists. The cartoon plays on gendered and racialised exoticism to attract foreign audiences to a 'unique[ly]' Bolivian or 'unboliviable' experience. The cartoons reflect common stereotypes about indigenous women. Even a cursory perusal of the drawing reveals that the wrestlers' skin tones visibly differ from those of 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 woman being strangled sticks out her bright red tongue, seemingly to gasp for air. This cartoon, reproduced on posters, flyers and stickers uses a representation that reflects the most superficial understanding of indigenous Bolivians.

**ONLY IN BOLIVIA**  
unboliviable

# Unique!!! CHOLITAS WRESTLING



Every Sunday at: 16:00 - 20:00  
In: Multifuncional El Alto city  
(CEJA AREA).

**Cheaper tickets available in:**

**ANDEAN SECRETS Alternative Tourism.**

Street: General Gonzales 1314 and Almirante Grau (San Pedro)  
Open: Monday to Friday 15:00 - 19:00. Saturday 10:00 - 18:00  
Sunday 10:00 - 15:00 + Phone: (591-2) 2490160 - 77294590 - 73083029  
[www.cholitaswrestling.com](http://www.cholitaswrestling.com)

**Ceja, El Alto city**  
**CEJA Show address**  
MULTIFUNCIONAL  
Av. Naciones Unidas  
Old Road  
La Paz City  
Final AUTOPISTA  
Transit control

**Down Town - La Paz**  
Almirante Grau  
Gas station  
1314  
Colombia  
Square San Pedro  
Gral. Gonzales  
**ANDEAN-SECRETS**

**Also: Group Transport, tourist guide, VIP seats, snack, souvenir and extreme fun, just for 80 bolivians.**

Figure 17.2 Advertisement distributed by Andean Secrets for Titanes del Ring wrestling events held every Sunday. These flyers are targeted towards foreign tourists and can be found at many backpackers' hostels and restaurant/bars catering to tourists in La Paz

Seward (1985, p. 22) suggests that cartoon representations of racial stereotypes are appealing because 'stereotypes define and package reality into convenient and manageable perceptions', allowing audience members to follow the tendency to build value around relations of similarity and difference (Taussig, 1993). The cartoons play up the luchadoras' 'authentically' indigenous bodies to a ridiculous extent. The cartoon cholas are iconic in the sense that they represent the hyperreal Indian (Ramos, 1994), a 'simulacrum' – substituting signs of the real for the real itself (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 4). Alneng calls these types of imaginaries within tourist encounters 'touristic phantasms' (2002, pp. 465–466), in which characters eschew nostalgia for authentic local people and focus primarily on difference as something to be consumed. The flyers communicate that even though the event may not be a site of learning about Bolivian traditions, it will certainly be 'UnBolivable'.

And tourists' expectations, though varied, were not surprising given this advertising. While waiting in line for events with other foreigners, I often overheard groups discussing what they expected from the show. Many had heard from other young tourists that there would be fireworks, 'midget tossing' and 'woman on woman action'. Drawing from their knowledge of WWE wrestling, these tourists expected something 'brutal', 'disturbingly real' or 'crazy' that would make a sensational story to tell friends back at home.

Others picked up on the aspects of indigeneity presented in the advertising and expected a performance that adhered more closely to something traditionally Bolivian. Upon seeing the globalised nature of this exhibition genre, many were disappointed. Ben, a student from London told me a few days after the performance, 'It was so amateur. I just can't see any tradition in it whatsoever... that was far too WWE... There's no way that can be tradition.' Ben's friend Jack held a similar point of view: 'I can [understand] women wrestlers fighting in like, a circle over some sort of... 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.' Both Jack and Ben, like many other tourists with whom I spoke, connect indigenous women to a sense of 'community' and 'tradition'.

Taken together with locals' reactions, it is clear that new ideologies of *indigenismo* are embedded in the luchadoras' performances. While *indigenismo* gave middle- and upper-class Bolivians access to indigenous forms of folklore in the twentieth century, similar social formations have now provided a grounding in which indigenous women's sport may be simultaneously promoted for profit to tourists while being used as evidence for both indigenous women's propensity towards violence and lack of seriousness in their political demands.



## Conclusion

Clearly, *lucha libre* has provided a form of empowerment for the women who wrestle, by allowing new opportunities for both social mobility and the type of mobility gained from international media attention. Many *luchadoras*, like Carmen Rosa and Juanita la Cariñosa, even see their performances as directly providing alternative narratives for other indigenous women. Juanita declares that the *luchadoras* may inspire young indigenous women to gain an education, fight back against violence and enter a more 'modern' world. Yet, middle-class aversions to displays of violence, along with elites' propensity to associate protest and violence with indigenous peoples complicate these claims. While the performances may be empowering for the individual *luchadoras*, their use of strategic essentialism in creating characters tends to reinforce stigma about indigenous women as violent and unruly rather than elevate their status as a group. In effect, these performances undergird new forms of *indigenismo* by exoticising caricatures of indigenous women engaged in violence, thus removing the political power violence may have in protest settings and relegating it to mere spectacle.

The *luchadoras'* representations of indigeneity, rather than pushing audiences to think differently, sustain a one-dimensional viewing of indigenous women's subjectivities. Though a cursory reading of the phenomenon may position the *luchadoras* as revolutionary and empowered, it is important to also consider the ways these women have had to essentialise their subject positions in order to gain legitimacy in a masculine sport (a legitimacy which itself is contested by some male *luchadores*; see Haynes, 2013b). Women's involvement in combat sports may be personally empowering, but with limitations for the population as a whole. While they may shift some hierarchies, others are left in place.

Rather than truly providing an example for the advancement of individual indigenous women, the *luchadoras* stand in as representations of indigenous women in general, as a character type or icon. Until indigenous women are cheered and empowered as individuals, rather than as essentialised and exoticised representatives of marginalised groups, their involvement cannot be portrayed as wholly beneficial.

## Note

1. Though Morales uses much rhetoric suggesting indigenous groups are a top priority, recent controversies including, but not limited to, his support for building a highway through indigenous lands within the Territorio indígena y parque nacional Isiboro-Secure have called this into question (see Haynes, 2013b; Postero, 2013).