



Ethnographic exposure and embodied solidarity: getting into the ring with the *Cholitas Luchadoras*

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ABSTRACT

For ten months in 2012, as part of ethnographic research, I wrestled in *lucha libre* events alongside Bolivian women known as the *Cholitas Luchadoras*. These wrestlers are costumed as ‘cholas,’ wearing pollera skirts closely associated with market vendors and indigenous women. Audience members debate whether they are authentic representations of indigenous women or essentialized racial characterizations. Regardless, the *luchadoras* have become popular locally and garnered international media attention. While my subjectivity is quite different from theirs, I argue that the exposure and risks of wrestling contributed to a form of ‘embodied solidarity’ among us. We both engaged in essentialization of our wrestling characters along gendered and racial lines, to attract audiences and advance our own aims. In doing so, both the *luchadoras* and I risked reinforcing some stereotypes and inequalities in order to challenge assumptions – transforming expectations for indigenous women and bringing performance and embodied knowledge more centrally into anthropological discussion. We both used essentialized performances in (hopeful) service of transformative politics. In centering attention on the body, I argue that solidarity in risk and exposure may at times outweigh global inequalities, momentarily reverse or equalize power dynamics, and provide a space in which ethnographic understanding may subvert imperialist histories.

KEYWORDS

Bolivia; chola; colonization;
lucha libre; performance

Entering the ring in La Paz

On 23 March 2012, I put on my Lady Blade costume in the Coliseo de Villa Victoria in a marginal neighborhood of La Paz, Bolivia. In a cement block locker room, I pulled on the tight spandex costume my trainer and I had commissioned from an elderly local seamstress, well known for creating *lucha libre* costumes. First, a shiny red and blue leotard, followed by silver leggings emblazoned with stylized butterflies on both calves. Then I pulled black boot covers over my well-worn Converse shoes, fastened a silver glittered belt around my waist, and placed cuffs on my wrists. Around my shoulders, I draped a bright blue cape covered in small silver lightning bolts, and finally, covered my face with a butterfly-shaped *antifaz* (half mask). Even with my body and face covered, entering the ring would be an act of exposure. This exposure carried dual risks; the physical risk of pain and injury and the symbolic risk of not performing well

for the audience. These were personal concerns, but also would significantly affect the wrestlers I collaborated with. Not only did my wrestling interlocutors have concern over my ability to execute moves safely, but also that I could excite the audience as I performed.

As I stepped out into the arena, Oswald, who was running the audio system, handed me the microphone. He asked what I would like to say to the audience before my first *lucha* in Bolivia. Having been instructed to speak to the audience in '*puro inglés*,' 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 then, shouting 'USA' and pumping my fist into the air, I ran to the ring to join my opponent, Betty 'the Super Cholita.'¹

I first arrived in Bolivia in 2009 interested in women's wrestling. In my high school days, more than a decade before, I had been involved with a small group who began as 'backyard wrestlers' and eventually became a legitimate independent wrestling operation in central Illinois (incidentally, this was also my first introduction to ethnography – see McBride 2005). Though this group had surprisingly progressive gender dynamics given the late 1990s 'attitude era' of professional wrestling (see Wood and Litherland 2018), it piqued my interest in the unequal gender dynamics of sport – especially a sport like wrestling that relies so heavily on narrative and spectacle. When I arrived in Bolivia for the first time, I was interested in the gendered meanings that emerged from wrestling where women in traditional layered *pollera* skirts wrestled men in the globalized uniform of spandex bodysuits.

My research (Haynes 2013a, 2013b, 2015, 2016, forthcoming) has focused on how the *luchadoras* use what seems to be an essentializing performance to draw attention to their indigenous identities, while simultaneously working to transform local understandings of the category of indigeneity. I explore how the instantiation of the *chola* characters in *lucha libre* spectacles, connected to globally circulating pop culture, can reinforce or shift assumptions about indigenous women as traditional, backward, or dangerous. In my early research I attended events and interviewed all manner of people associated with the phenomenon: *luchadoras*, male *luchadores*, promoters, tour guides, and both local and foreign audience members. Before finishing three months of research in 2011, I interviewed a *luchador* in his early 30s named Edgar. He suggested that when I returned the following January, I should start training with his group Super Catch, which included both men and women wrestlers. In early 2012 I began ten months of training, and from March to November performed in seven live events and more than a dozen short televised segments.

In this article, I concentrate on notions of exposure that relate to my own participation, as a supplement to the important questions I have previously explored focusing on the *luchadoras* themselves. In doing so, I highlight the ways the body is both put on display and physically impacted in wrestling. In drawing attention to this dual importance of the body, I argue that the already embodied practice of ethnography may be pushed further toward embodied solidarity, even as the bodies in question are positioned in vastly different ways, both locally and globally.

This differential in positionality exists in part because I am not an indigenous Bolivian woman, nor do I have any native ancestry. While my body and the *luchadoras'* bodies in the ring may be under similar physical risk, the social meanings of our bodies are quite different. As Akeia Benard notes, because the body is 'laden with meaning and positioned within particular systems of meaning, it is always in view and on view' (2016, 2). Gender is central to this gaze, but must always be discussed as racialized, given that, particularly in the (post)colonial context, these two social constructs were created and are reproduced in and through one another (see Benard 2016; Stoler 1989; Story 2010). My subjectivity as a white-classified woman from North America differed significantly from that of the women who became the focus of my ethnography. At the same time, our shared experiences and interest in exhibition wrestling went some distance in creating what I call 'embodied solidarity' among us. The main aim of this article then, is to explore the ways in which embodied solidarity though exposure both reinforces and challenges hierarchies of power between North Atlantic anthropologist and indigenous Global South interlocutor – and, more broadly, the regimes of power-knowledge (Foucault 1984) that reinforce global inequalities.

The icon of the *chola*

On the surface, *chol*as are often considered romantic figures, selling produce in the market, prepared meals on city streets, or used clothing in sidewalk stalls. *Chol*as are at times romanticized characters of tradition, appearing on postcards of bucolic Andean landscapes accompanied by llamas or sheep. Other times, the *chola* appears as a reviled figure, considered dirty and dangerous because she collapses accepted dichotomies of urban/rural, developed/underdeveloped and even white/indigenous (Weismantel 2001, 80).

In a strict sense, *chola* (or its masculine form *cholo*)² describes a racial category between white and indigenous. But *chola/o* is not equivalent to *mestiza/o*. In the early twentieth century, the two terms began to be distinguished, wherein 'mestizo' indicated a person with mixed indigenous ancestry who exhibited characteristics associated with becoming 'civilized' and closer to *criollo* (Spanish-descended). *Chol*as and *chol*os were those who clung to the 'backward' ways of indigenous life, despite some European ancestry (see Tamayo 1910). In framing this difference as racial, these categories turned attention to the body as the origin and location of difference (see Weismantel 2001). Today, *cholo/a* maintains racial stigma, positioning subjects closer to indigeneity (Rivera Cusicanqui 1993), and in urban Bolivia is at times interchangeable with 'indigenous.' Indeed, many *luchadoras* refer to themselves as both *mujer indígena* and *chola*.

*Chol*as have long been revolutionary figures. They were prominent figures in anarchist syndicates in La Paz in the early 1900s (Lehm and Rivera Cusicanqui 1988), which often used militant tactics to achieve their aims (Stephenson 1999, 11). Their politicization extended beyond labor organizing to their personal lives, in which many rejected institutions such as marriage and motherhood practices 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 – placed them outside the normative gender subjectivity of the time (Stephenson 1999, 29). They became dangerous figures then, not just because of the physical violence associated with protest, but because they challenged *criollo* and *mestizo* social norms.

Today, the *chola* retains the stigmas of this history, while experiencing increased status, due to both representations in the tourist industry and increasing attention to indigenous issues during the presidency of Evo Morales. As Bolivia's first president to claim indigenous roots, Morales brought indigeneity into the spotlight when he took office in 2006. He spearheaded constitutional reforms which, among other things, changed the country's official name to The Plurinational State of Bolivia in recognition of the sovereignty of all indigenous nations within its borders. Even as citizen protests, violence, and military pressure forced his resignation in late 2019, Bolivians still noted the great advancements he made for indigenous peoples. In particular, his MAS party was an important platform for a number of *chola* women to assume political posts, including Congresswoman Cristina Choque Paxi and El Alto's mayor, Soledad Chapeton.³

As these women have gained political power, the tourism industry of Bolivia has continued to promote the *chola* as a romanticized traditional icon. These contradictory depictions of the *chola* result from competing understandings of indigeneity in the Andes, and its shifting place within political, cultural, and social transformations. This palimpsest of historical associations lends meaning to the *Cholitas Luchadoras* – the characters the women enact in the ring – but are also influential in the *luchadoras'* lives outside the ring.

In my research, I spent many hours a week training and performing with the *luchadoras*, conversing over post-training tea in central La Paz markets, discussing strategies for nursing sore muscles and joints, accompanying them on weekly rounds of passing out flyers at public plazas and tourist companies, and joining the occasional weekend outing to celebrate a birthday or holiday. I learned that these women came to *lucha libre* in different ways and at different times. Some started wrestling at the beginning of the phenomenon in the early 2000s. Others had only trained for a few months when I met them in 2011 or 2012. Some had uncles or brothers who were wrestlers, while others constantly argued with family members who did not approve of them wrestling. Some dressed *de pollera* every day; others were more likely to wear jeans as they went about their daily lives. In the ring, some enacted a romanticized notion of the *chola*, while others (such as Claudina la Maldita) made explicit reference to the *chola* as a formidable working-class hero. Jennifer Dos Caras (Two-faced Jennifer) even performed the racial fluidity often associated with the *chola* (see de la Cadena 1995, 331), sometimes wearing a Western-style costume and occasionally donning a *pollera* for her matches.

One thing all the *luchadoras* had in common, despite the opportunities they felt they gained from wrestling, was the fact that they knew it could not be a full-time job. Wrestlers in Bolivia, even in the most well-attended events, only make 10–30 USD a show, and shows are usually held only once per week. While a few *luchadoras* spent their days at home caring for small children, most worked as small-scale vendors, janitorial staff, or cooks, or else attended school. While the youngest of the *luchadoras* often studied for careers such as teaching or nursing that would be seen as part of the advancement of indigenous women in Bolivia in the early 21st century, these other jobs were not unusual for indigenous women in the city. All of the *luchadoras* I interviewed explicitly identified as indigenous women, speaking with pride about their origins in rural areas, and the ways in which they hope to act as positive and visible representations of *cholitas*.

Hemispheric and global circuits

Cholas are common characters in Bolivian film and television, advertising, theater, touristic promotions, and literature. Their characterization in *lucha libre* departs from these representations – which are national in nature – because wrestling is understood as closely related to global exchange, particularly with North America. Charles Wilson (1959) traces the history of modern exhibition wrestling to soldiers' leisure activities during the United States Civil War. By the end of the 19th century, P.T. Barnum was promoting 'wrestling spectacles,' transforming wrestling from a contest to a representation of a contest. These spectacles were replicated by others throughout the country, and by the 1920s promoters began to add gimmicks to make characters more memorable. In 1933, the promoter Salvador Lutteroth imported this style of wrestling to Mexico, and began the Empresa Mexicana de Lucha Libre (Levi 2008, 23). In the following years, wrestlers began to shift costuming, character, and physical techniques, making *lucha libre* a form of exhibition wrestling unique to Mexico.

By the 1950s, Mexican *lucha libre* had become highly popular, and some Mexican *luchadores* took their show on the road throughout Latin America. They made their way to Bolivia around 1965, when they first trained local wrestlers. The popularity of wrestling in Bolivia grew in the 1970s but waned in the 1980s. It experienced renewed interest in the 1990s when local groups first appeared on television. By the end of the decade however, intra-group conflicts resulted in *lucha libre* almost entirely disappearing. Up until this point, almost all wrestlers in Bolivia had been men and performed as superhero or supervillain characters like 'Medico Loco' or 'Mr. Atlas.' It was only with the introduction of women wrestling in *polleras* in 2001 that *lucha libre* regained a local following.

In most contexts, wrestling has been seen as a degraded form of sport ever since it became a representation of a contest. The source of this ill repute seems to be wrestling's violence, sexual undertones, and reliance on melodramatic narratives. Indeed, these three aspects of wrestling suggest that it fits into Linda Williams's (1991) notion of 'genres of excess,' like horror, pornography, and melodrama, which audiences often assess as having low cultural status. The hijinks common in exhibition wrestling across the hemisphere are also dismissed as clowning, and debates and jokes about wrestling being 'fake' further contribute to its low cultural status.

Most successful exhibition wrestlers throughout the world rely on performing a character that gives the audience a sense of 'why there is something at stake in a particular fight' (Smith 2014, 66). Further degrading the genre, many characters rely on essentializing representations, including those related to nationality (the Iron Sheik and Sgt. Slaughter [see Rahmani 2007]), gender and sexual identity (Casandro [see Levi 1998]), or race (Kamala the Ugandan Giant [see Maguire and Wozniak 1987]). A *cholita* character fits this essentializing mold. She is a well-recognized cultural icon, easily distilled into racial and gendered stereotypes, and made visible in the sorts of overt symbolism necessary for wrestling (see Barthes 1957).

The distinctive and spectacular nature of the *chola* characters has undoubtedly been the primary catalyst for the *luchadoras'* international recognition. In the last fifteen years, they have appeared in National Geographic and the New York Times, on BBC News, in at least four independent documentaries, and on popular television shows such as Top Gear and The Great Race.⁴ The 'traditional' *chola* clothing they wear while wrestling has been

central to such publicity. For foreign travelers, the *polleras* make these *luchas* a unique tourist attraction (see Haynes 2013b). But even for local audiences, it is often impossible to ascertain exactly where the *luchadora* ends and the 'cholita' begins. With their bodies as incontrovertible signs of *chola*-ness, these characters constitute a performance of the self. The very bodies of the *luchadoras*, through both their identification as part of *el pueblo* and the forms of power they enact in the ring, were central to the pleasure many spectators reported in seeing the *chola* represented as an empowered symbol for a marginalized group.

Audience interpretation

The *luchadoras'* exposure, of course, necessarily implies an audience to whom they expose themselves. Audiences at wrestling events in La Paz range from 100 to 500 people, depending on the group performing. The majority of these spectators are local residents of working-class neighborhoods, who consider themselves to have some indigenous ancestry. They represent men and women of various ages, life stages, and ways of engaging with what unfolds in the ring. Usually however, groups set aside the first few rows for tourists, bussed to events in marginal neighborhoods from central La Paz by tour companies. These travelers, usually young adults, pay about seven times the ticket price locals pay (14 USD vs. 2 USD) for a performance they describe as distinctly local, a unique show, and an exciting story to tell friends at home (see Haynes 2013a). Thus, tourists serve to bring profit, but also to promote Bolivian *lucha libre* to an audience imagined as having global reach.

Many locals, and in particular younger women, see the *luchadoras* much as the *luchadoras* see themselves – as role models demonstrating the ways indigenous women may go beyond society's traditional expectations for them. The *luchadoras* themselves also spoke of transforming the roles for indigenous women in Bolivia. Juanita la Cariñosa, Benita la Intocable, and Carmen Rosa, all veteran *luchadoras*, each spoke to me about the ways *lucha libre* has opened opportunities for them to travel internationally, become spokespeople in their neighborhoods, and act as role models for indigenous women who have not had opportunities related to education, politics, and working outside of domestic service (see Haynes 2013b). This exposure creates space for reimagining what indigenous subjectivity might look like in Bolivia.

However, a number of Bolivians critique the *luchadoras* for acting in ways that lack respect for the history of the *chola* and indigenous women. For some, the *luchadoras* bring shame on themselves and those they represent through choosing exposure within a degraded form of global popular culture. These audience members suggest their character work may be uncomfortably close to racist stereotypes that position indigenous people as violent and backward (see Goldstein 2004; Lazar 2008). Not only do the *luchadoras* wear exotic costumes, but much of their bodily action in the ring highlights their indigeneity. They often swing an opponent into the ropes using her double braids. They use their buttocks, made even wider by their *polleras*, to push opponents around the ring, or even backward off their feet. The *luchadoras* also play off of widely-known jokes about the stench that emanates from below the *pollera* (see Weismantel 2001, 260) – at times lifting their skirt toward their opponent, sending the recipient reeling backwards, clutching their throat in feigned asphyxiation. These critics deem the burlesquing of

indigenous characters a disservice to 'real' indigenous women, implying that the *luchadoras* are not part of this social category. Instead they see the *luchadoras* as using symbols of indigeneity as a substitute for substance.

While some male wrestlers joined fans in critiquing the *luchadoras* as merely 'clowning' (see Haynes 2013a), many male *luchadores* expressed that they saw the *luchadoras'* popularity as a means to greater exposure for all Bolivian wrestling. Despite the attention garnered by the *Cholitas Luchadoras*, Bolivian *lucha libre* remains small in scale, with most events in La Paz attracting fewer than 200 spectators. Ninja Boliviano, who trained in Mexico City, criticized local wrestling organizations saying, 'Wrestling in Bolivia is not on the level that they have in Mexico, which is the cradle of catchascan.'⁵ Not all the wrestlers are prepared physically and technically.' Many Bolivians confirmed that in the larger world of exhibition wrestling they are seen either as underdeveloped or a joke.

In addition to the competing ways in which the *Cholitas Luchadoras* may be interpreted, my own presence as a symbol of North America in performances adds a layer of complexity to the ways visibility, exposure, and racial categories come into play. My presence in wrestling shows also relied on essentialization – of whiteness as foreign and the deeply entrenched global inequalities between the United States and Bolivia. My own exposure then reinforced notions of global center and periphery. As a representative of a place considered the origin of modern exhibition wrestling, the legitimacy that my presence engendered bolstered ideas that those in the Global South may adopt or even reconfigure such forms of pop culture, but in doing so participate in a kind of homogenization which ultimately reinforces global inequalities (a concept critiqued by many, including García Canclini 1995; Hannerz 1989; Rama 1996). The presence of my body – a visibly white foreign body – in the ring foreclosed the possibility of reading the *Cholitas Luchadoras* without attention to colonial and imperial global relations.

Becoming international

When I started training, it became clear that many of the men in Super Catch, including Edgar, saw my participation as a form of entrée into the international wrestling scene. When I arrived to train for the first time in January 2012, I was surprised that the first question that Edgar asked me was how I would like to 'enter the ring.' He did not mean how I would physically get through the ropes, but rather, what sort of character would I like to portray. This meant both choosing between *técnica* [good] and *ruda* [bad], but also creating a gimmick – a character that plays into storylines, rivalries and alliances. Because I had no idea how to respond, the whole group became involved. With several of the Super Catch wrestlers, we decided on a Wonder Woman-esque North American character. 'Something like *La Mujer Maravillosa*,' Edgar suggested, and all agreed that this would allow us to play up my North American-ness. 'Let your hair grow,' he told me, so that I would be visibly *rubia*. 'Mas gringa todavía!' We came up with the name Lady Blade: 'Lady' connoted western femininity to those in the conversation,⁶ and 'Blade' sounded dangerous and recognizable to Spanish-speakers in its English form. With my character decided, we got to work on falls, somersaults, *llaves* [wrestling moves], and *castigos* [holds that serve to wear down the opponent by inflicting pain]. My body had to fit the part, not just as something that filled the character's costume, but through believable movement as well.

I suspected that Edgar first invited me to the group to help to build bridges with North American wrestlers that might help Bolivians gain a hold in wrestling circles beyond their own borders. Though the group I had been involved with in the 1990s had long-since disbanded, Edgar and other wrestlers tasked me with writing to my old group members, to see if anyone had contact with people still wrestling. Though my Bolivian wrestling *compañeros*⁷ were dreaming of connections in WWE, I was only able to materialize strained relationships with a few wrestlers in regional independent groups they had never heard of. This tactic failed, but as Lady Blade I could at least attract attention locally as an 'international' wrestler to increase the status of local events.

With this logic, Lady Blade's debut suddenly took on new importance to the group as a whole. They sped up my training, and I was scheduled to appear in an event in late March 2012. Over ten weeks of training, I mastered nine *llaves*: *mariposa*, *tijeras*, *cazadora*, *alpina*, *ángel*, *huracarrana*, *la mística*, *el bastón*, and *la plancha*. I could fall without hurting myself then jump back up again. Edgar taught me how to perform *castigos* and how to react to them – though I'm not sure I ever did either convincingly. Nonetheless, I was declared ready for public performance, and two weeks before the March event, we began a circuit of appearances on local television morning shows in which my *compañeros* and I would perform a few *llaves* then announce the upcoming event. The hosts would inevitably ask Lady Blade a few questions in Spanish, to which I would respond in English with prepared *técnica* talking points about promoting solidarity of women's wrestling around the world, hoping to learn *lucha libre* style (as opposed to U.S.-style wrestling) from the *luchadoras*, and challenging Bolivian wrestlers to *luchas internacionales*.

Within the geopolitical context of 2012, the United States was best known among Bolivians for Barack Obama (a positive figure), gun violence and war (evaluated negatively), racism (also negative), capitalism and consumerism (often articulated as 'Wall Street'), desires for travel, and art, music, and Hollywood films.⁸ Though television and film media from the United States have thoroughly penetrated Bolivian popular culture, new U.S.-made consumer products are usually prohibitively expensive given high tariffs, and visas to visit the U.S. are notoriously impossible to obtain. This contributes to a form of 'imagined cosmopolitanism,' which Schein describes as a process in which media flows into a place, and desires flow out in 'a metaphorical border crossing in the other direction' (Schein 1999, 369). As Appadurai contends, through this type of circulation, more people around the world understand their lives through the proliferation of possibilities offered by mass media: 'Fantasy is now a social practice' (1996, 7). This is not just about participating in a unidirectional current that moves from center to periphery, but hybridity in global flows (García Canclini 1995). However, as Appadurai 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). Thus, the presence of Lady Blade in the Coliseo of Villa Victoria did not much change the actual form of *lucha libre* that occurs there. Rather, it created an opportunity for those present to imagine Bolivian *lucha libre* as an influential part of the global phenomenon of wrestling rather than a small-scale copy of a North American original.

As the men of Super Catch often complain, their local wrestling events lack the outside acceptance and influence that would signal true arrival in global circuits. Lady Blade's

presence allowed for imagining cosmopolitanism in a more tangible way. The very presence of the character brought the distant into the context of the local, and in so doing, brought a global dimension to *lucha libre* of La Paz. Perhaps most importantly for Super Catch, it meant that matches could use the cache of the term 'international' in advertising.

For my first event, one entire side of the flyer was dedicated to my match with Betty (see Figure 1). This side of the flyer was headed by '*Lucha Libre Internacional*,' with our images and countries' flags just above. Between the images of Lady Blade and Betty, seemingly squared off against each other, were our names and 'EE.UU. vs. Bolivia.' 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' (the challenge starts tonight).

The reason my match with Betty was given its own side of the flyer was not simply because we were women. In fact, Mercedes, another woman wrestling that same night, did not even appear on the flyer. But as the words, '*internacional*' and 'EE.UU.' attest, it was my global symbolism that was so important to the event. I was one of the least skilled wrestlers, but the appeal of the international made me one of the most popular among local audiences.



Figure 1. Publicity flyer for Super Catch event of 23 March 2012 featuring Lady Blade and Betty the Super Cholita.

By the time the first event arrived, I still didn't feel entirely prepared, but it seemed there was no choice but to jump in the ring with Betty. She and I executed the moves we had decided upon, and Lince, performed by Edgar, 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 me ducking under his attempted clothesline. We then did our usual repertoire of *mariposas* and *cazadoras*. Each time Lady Blade threw Lince to the ground the audience cheered. After I left Lince on the ring floor with a successful *tijeras*, Gran Mortis entered the ring and began punching him. Kazama entered and punched Gran Mortis. Then, one by one, each *luchador* in the group entered the ring, resulting in a full-blown free-for-all with Betty and I outside the ring hitting each other with plastic chairs. In the end Estigma cleared the ring. Still in character, I walked back to Oswald, the announcer, who asked me what I thought of the match.

It wasn't fair. I came here to wrestle Betty. It's 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 Lady Blade. The group included a few adults asking for an autograph or photo as well. Over time, as I continued to perform in events, I often had similar experiences with fans despite my very amateur abilities, and I realized an alliance between Lady Blade and the *luchadoras* was easy to pull off. Regardless of my inferior wrestling skills, our popularity was part of the same phenomenon, based in the gendered and racial essentialization of our characters.

Essentialization & legitimacy

Both myself and the *luchadoras* enacted essentialization through dress, hair, language, and bodily movement for the audience's consumption. The Lady Blade character was crafted around essentialized whiteness. Though Dyer suggests whiteness is usually invisible (1997), it was especially visible next to the *luchadoras*' essentialized indigeneity. I was legible as North American, not just because of a red, white, and blue costume, but because I appeared as white. Likely, a Native, Latinx, Asian-descended, Black, or mixed race North American would not have been read by audience members in a way that corresponded with the essentializing representation. At the same time, whiteness is not just about being pale; it invokes, and is invoked by, a host of symbols of which skin coloring is only a part. 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). Weismantel points out that, in the Andes specifically, wealth and social power are associated with whiteness (2001, 244). The '*puro inglés*' with which Edgar suggested I address the crowd indexed foreignness, but also the hegemonic order of global capitalism (see Holbrow 2007), thereby connecting Lady Blade to the status of English in global economic spheres and educational attainment. In combination with corporeal and semiotic modes of referencing the U.S., my linguistic abilities proved I was not just a criolla Bolivian dressed up in an American flag.

Appearance of legitimacy as a North American was easy to achieve, but I also had to make myself believable as a wrestler. I was very conscious about being ‘tough’ and continuing to practice even when my body hurt and all I really wanted to do was eat a *salteña* and take a nap. I would stay at training sessions 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.⁹ Failing to move my body correctly carried physical risks, not just for myself, but for those I was collaborating with in the ring. These fears, along with the exhaustion that comes from any physical activity performed at 4000 meters (13,000 feet) above sea level, added to the embodied solidarity I shared with the *luchadoras* and male *luchadores* in Super Catch. Just as important, the fear of not upholding my believability as a wrestler for the audience felt like a risk with heightened consequences. Such a failure, again, would not have only individual effects, but would call into question the legitimacy of the group as a whole – the very legitimacy Edgar and other *compañeros* hoped to reinforce through my presence.

This legitimacy was wrapped up in the Lady Blade gimmick, one to which I agreed out of loyalty, but not necessarily enthusiastically. I often joked with my *compañeros* about how I wasn’t exactly the proudest representative of the politics of my own country, but the wrestlers usually dismissed this with funny comments about Obama’s superiority to George W. Bush. This is to say that the *luchadores* of Super Catch had certain goals in mind, as did I. These goals came together in Lady Blade. My goal was to learn about wrestling through participation, and this was best accomplished by allowing my Super Catch *compañeros* to design my character to their advantage. Their primary goal was attracting audience members, and they believed this was best achieved through the international gimmick attached to Lady Blade. Their continued invitations over the last eleven years for me to come back and wrestle full-time further suggest that they attributed success to the gimmick.

Like myself, the *luchadoras* have also not been entirely autonomous in performing as *Cholitas Luchadoras*. The ways both the *luchadoras* and myself have been promoted happened with our consent, but not necessarily entirely in the way we each might have designed. In the early 2000s, when *chola* characters first appeared, power dynamics in Bolivian wrestling were quite uneven, with promoters controlling who would wrestle, under what circumstances, and how much they would be paid. Some of the *luchadoras* left their primary group to form their own organization in which they controlled events, and maintained their *chola* characters in doing so. Since then, the dynamics have been quite complex, with *luchadoras*, male *luchadores*, (mostly male) promoters, touristic companies, and spectators whose desires are taken into account in relation to potential profits (see Laine 2020), all part of a negotiation of how wrestling events play out. Within this formation, *luchadoras* who have wrestled longer, have familial relationships with men involved in the industry, or who have the time and resources to take on an organizing role have more power than other *luchadoras*. At the same time there are similar power differentials among men. People with more power make the decisions, and those with less power at times dissent. But what is clear is that the industry as a whole has successfully (at least to a modest extent) capitalized on the *cholita* characters as quintessential Bolivian women. This marketing strategy has worked equally among local and global audiences.

Sammond explains that women who wrestle in the United States have 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 both audiences and other Bolivian wrestlers. Their exposure through performance – something in which they are complicit, but not always the architects – is an act in which they reinforce many of the stereotypes, stigmas, and historical complexities attached to *cholas* and indigenous women. At the same time, they transform meanings of indigeneity to include that which goes beyond the traditional and local. Some aspects of their characters no doubt support critics' claims that the *luchadoras* reinforce racial stereotypes. However, this criticism ignores the ways their very presence in the ring pushes boundaries of expectations for indigenous women. These women's self-consciously constructed exposure calls into question assumptions about indigenous women's representation, thereby challenging and broadening understandings of what it means to be indigenous in Bolivia.

This pushing of boundaries works in part through the conscious exposure the *luchadoras* invite in their performances. The instantiation of indigenous women actively performing (rather than passively being part of a gaze) and doing so in a degraded pop culture form (rather than a traditional activity) works against expectations that indigenous peoples must be traditional to be authentic. The exposure of performance allows them to enact identity in multiple and competing ways, which reinforce some forms of ideological power, but resist others.

Performance is not the only frame through which stereotypes may be simultaneously resisted and reinforced, but it is important to this particular formation of gendered indigeneity in Bolivia. *Cholas* are a visible and constant feature of public and private spaces in La Paz, yet there is something distinctive about their explicit exposure in the ring. While the image of the *chola* is made visible on tourist postcards, national food advertisement campaigns, and even young urban Bolivians' fashionable t-shirts, these representations often position the *chola* as a passive object of the gaze. In wrestling, they actively draw attention to themselves as characters.

The women themselves see their engagement with global circuits and non-traditional activities as a way of transforming what indigenous women 'can' or 'should' do and who they 'are.' They do not allow themselves to be relegated to activities deemed 'traditional' or otherwise 'appropriate' for indigenous women, nor do they deny their indigeneity in order to fit into expectations for global pop culture. Rather than delegitimizing them as indigenous, their presence in *lucha libre* expands possibilities for indigenous women. While the consequences are messy, and they receive criticism from a number of directions, their exposure through performance is part of a growing reconfiguration of meanings of indigeneity in 21st century Bolivia. And despite the racial and gendered essentialism embedded in their characters, being women has remarkably contributed to their influence in this process. Through their exposure, they both reconfirm and resist the racialized structures of expectation as a form of disidentification (Muñoz 1999).

Conclusion: embodied knowledge, embodied solidarity

As I mentioned in the first section of this article, my point of connection with the *luchadoras* was through gendered aspects of wrestling, rather than indigenous identity. As this project has evolved over the last decade, issues of indigeneity have become far more prominent in my approach, leading me at times to ask what it means for me specifically to be writing on this subject. At the same time, to diminish the importance of indigeneity here would result in glaring omission. Though I will never know the experience of being an indigenous Bolivian woman, the gendered and racial essentialisms that undergird both of our performances brought to light the ways in which we both had something to gain and something to lose through exposure.

Both the *luchadoras* and I have been complicit in, products of, and beneficiaries as a result of our exposure(s). The *luchadoras* consciously reframe indigeneity through global pop culture. I have gained research essential to my career. We have both certainly made these strides in less than linear ways, often reinforcing stereotypes, assumptions, and inequalities along the way, and the consequences are not equal for us. But inequalities are inherent in any ethnographic research (see Behar and Gordon 1995; Clifford 1988; Marcus and Fischer 1986; among many others), reminding us that transformative acts seldom come without the risk of reinforcing aspects of the ideologies they are intended to dismantle.

Just as the *luchadoras* both reinforce and resist ideological assumptions through essentialization, my own aims were also realized in my complicity in being commodified as a quintessential gringa. Perhaps my presence alongside the *luchadoras* in the ring risked reinforcing a number of imperialist notions. Schein discusses the consumption of Western women in China, where they signify modernity, prosperity, liberation, freedom, individualism, democracy, progress, and femininity, possessing the wealth and power associated with whiteness (1994, 143–144). If similar associations are present in Bolivia, perhaps then, part of my risk in exposure was reinforcing the U.S. as an ideal to which Bolivia should aspire. More generally, the essentialization of Lady Blade's North Americanness also risked reinforcing perceptions that hybrid forms of culture may only be legitimate when valorized by the Global North. At times, Bolivian material items like the *chullo* (alpaca wool hat) may be seen by locals as outdated or backward, but increasing use by foreigners has heightened its popularity among urban youth, raising its local status (a similar phenomenon is happening with the hallucinogenic drug Ayahuasca). With this in mind, perhaps I risked reinforcing the global power dynamics of center and periphery with my participation.

What I hoped to accomplish through this risk, however, was to complicate the power dynamics between anthropologist and 'native' by destabilizing hierarchies of knowledge. As Berry et al. (2017, 1) insist, fieldwork in anthropology is an 'epistemological space of investigation shaped by histories of European and US imperialism and colonialism,' which are rooted in the valuing of certain kinds of knowledge over others. As Rosaldo famously suggested, the 'the eye of ethnography' is connected to 'the I of imperialism' (1989, 41). Sight and surveillance depend on detachment and distance. The aim of embodied solidarity, then, is to close this distance, while remaining cognizant that it will never be eclipsed completely.

Ethnography inherently involves embodied acts of physical co-presence, sensory experience, eating, sleeping, sitting, and moving throughout the day – acts which are felt through the body and have lasting effects on the body. Despite Margaret Lock's call almost 30 years ago to center the body in anthropology (1993, 133), these experiences are often considered background to the kinship networks, political power structures, gendered or racial inequalities, or religious rites that are foregrounded as the 'subject' of the ethnographer's project. At times, this backgrounding serves to detach the ethnographer from shared bodily experiences with those surrounding them, reinserting a kind of virtual distance. In a process of what Dwight Conquergood calls 'epistemic violence,' the 'embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, [and] co-experienced' ways of knowing are displaced, yet remain all the more meaningful because of their 'refusal' to be made explicit (2002, 146). Co-performance, then, may be an important way of 'knowing and deeply sensing the other,' all the while remaining aware of the ways performance carries 'complex ethical tensions, tacit political commitments, and moral ambiguities' (Conquergood 2003, 400). Thus, performance necessitates reflexivity, particularly in terms of global political positionality.

The physical risks of wrestling necessarily reverse the hierarchy that values academic authority over embodied knowledge (see Conquergood 1991). Being able to cite the ways in which power is reconstituted through habitus (Bourdieu 1977) doesn't help much in avoiding a neck injury while repeatedly falling flat on your back. Through my participation in wrestling, I placed myself in a subordinate position to the embodied knowledge of the *luchadoras*. But it was not simply my body that became a focus; rather, the interaction of my body with other bodies required the utmost attention.

In particular, the physically risky nature of wrestling requires performing both for and with one another in a co-production of intimacy and trust. When you are in the ring, there are only three things on your mind: the first is staying safe; the second is keeping your partner(s) safe; and the third is entertaining the audience. Other forms of knowledge fall away, and bodies – your own and your partner's – become the focus of all you do. To place yourself at the mercy of others, and accept responsibility for them in return requires a great degree of confidence with them. While the symbolic and cultural stakes were different for each of us, the physical stakes of wrestling for myself and my *compañeras* were entangled with one another (quite literally). In agreeing to engage in wrestling together, with both performance and physical risks heightened, our shared responsibility for one another's physical wellbeing necessitated embodied solidarity.

The racial and geopolitical differences between our bodies in the ring are both symbolic and a matter of materially experienced inequalities. It is easy, then, to read these bodies as at odds with one another. They appear to fight against one another, to represent the 'developed' and 'developing' dichotomy created and sustained through colonization and continuing power differentials between neoimperialist centers and postcolonial spaces. But the trick of *lucha libre* is that even as it seems two (or more) bodies are fighting *against* one another, they are actually engaged in a mutual and intimate collaboration. Perhaps then, this kind of performance presents a paradigm for approaching ethnography as collaboration and exchange, particularly when bodies are so crucial to both.

Notes

1. In this article, I distinguish between wrestling characters (in-ring personas or gimmicks) and wrestling performers who exist and have intentions outside of the ring. For clarity, I use 'Cholitas Luchadoras' and specific character names to describe Bolivian *luchadoras* and *luchadores* as they perform in the ring, and personal pseudonyms or '*luchadoras*' generally to describe their thoughts, actions, and narratives. In the same way, I use the first person when describing my emotions, physicality, and understandings connected to my experiences wrestling, and use 'Lady Blade,' my character name, when describing the performance and audience responses.
2. As de la Cadena (1995) points out, *chola* and *cholo* are not just differently gendered forms of the same word, but are categories that are not quite equivalent. Women 'are more Indian than men' and have a harder time achieving status as *mestiza*, and the *chola* is sexualized in ways that the *cholo* is not (de la Cadena 1995, 329). In recent years, the genderless term *cholx* has begun to be used, primarily by GLBT and feminist activists in Bolivia. However, the use of this '-x' ending in Bolivia often carries upper class and transnational connotations, making its juxtaposition with the *chola/o* subjectivity transgressive.
3. These women were preceded by Remedios Loza, who became the first *chola* to have a radio program in 1962, a national legislator in parliament in 1989, and the first woman to run for the presidency in Bolivia in 1997.
4. The *luchadoras*' international popularity has increased the frequency with which middle and upper class Bolivians invoke them in everyday speech (usually in critical ways), but has had limited impact on the numbers of working class locals who attend events. It has, however, incited increased pride from some locals who have long enjoyed *lucha libre*, one of whom called the *luchadoras* 'our unique contribution to the world of wrestling.'
5. 'Catchascan' is a term for exhibition wrestling in Bolivia, derived from the English term 'catch as catch can.' This is also the meaning of 'catch' in the group's name, Super Catch.
6. Some U.S. academics have asked if the upper class connotation of 'Lady' is perceived by Spanish speakers. My interlocutors suggest that it is more closely aligned with *señorita*, denoting a young woman of any class, rather than a woman of high social rank.
7. Though emerging gender-neutral uses of Spanish offer options of referring to this gender-mixed group as *compañer@s* or *compañerxs*, it was common at the time for *luchadores* to refer to other members of the group as 'mis compañeros de lucha,' so I have retained this linguistic form here.
8. These are based on a survey of 94 middle and working class Bolivians in La Paz and El Alto.
9. The very fact that I was wrestling in the first place is noteworthy, given my somewhat introverted nature. Certainly, teaching college students involves a certain amount of performance, but standing in front of the classroom, my body itself is not exposed in the heightened sense that it is in wrestling.

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