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Kiss with a fist

The *chola's* humor and humiliation in Bolivian *lucha libre*

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Lucha libre, a form of exhibition wrestling, has recently gained popularity in Bolivia, thanks to mixed-gender matches featuring traditionally-dressed women known as the *cholitas luchadoras*. Within their matches, the act of kissing is often used as a form of humiliating an opponent. This article explores the convergence of eroticism and humiliation in these kisses as an entry point for a broader understanding of the deployment of power in the Bolivian context. Taking both the symbolic language of bodies in the ring and audience discourses about that action, I explore how associations between humiliation and demasculinization may reinforce the potency of masculinity as a position of power. Further, seeing the *chola* as representative of the Bolivian nation helps us to understand the ways that humiliation works as a recognizable trope for Bolivian audiences, lending import to these seemingly superficial performances.

Keywords: *lucha libre*, Bolivia, *chola*, indigeneity, sexuality, gender, eroticism, humiliation

High on the Bolivian altiplano, in an “arena” that more resembles an open-air warehouse than a sports stadium, Claudina “la Maldita” enters the wrestling ring. Her opponent is Fiera, a middle-aged, chubby Bolivian man dressed in a black jumpsuit with florescent pink trim. Claudina is wearing her usual *cholita* costume of a blouse, large layered *pollera* skirt, and double braids. Claudina is one of the *cholitas luchadoras*, Bolivian women who wrestle each other and men in weekly events more aptly described as “sports entertainment” than athletic competition. Given their costuming, they may appear to represent some form of “traditional” ritual of wrestling, but they only first appeared in the wrestling rings of La Paz in 2001, as an attempt to attract more audience members. In this match (17 April 2011), amid flips and body slams, Fiera pinned Claudia against the ropes and



Figure 1. Fiera kisses Claudina “la Maldita” [Copyright: Nell Haynes]

kissed her (Figure 1). Claudina shook her head, threw her flailing arms up, and kicked her feet. After about ten seconds Fiera withdrew his lips and flung Claudina into the ropes on the opposite side of the ring. The match then continued with the usual moves, until eventually Claudina was able to pin Fiera to the mat for a count of 3, thus winning the bout.

This was not the first kiss I saw as part of a *lucha libre* match in Bolivia, nor was it the last. Throughout my time as a spectator between 2009 and 2013, I saw similar kissing moves in at least ten different matches. Of the five active *lucha libre* groups in La Paz, two consistently used this action in performances. Sometimes the male *luchador* kissed the female *luchadora*, and sometimes the *luchadora* kissed her male opponent. Once in a match between Comando Zabala, a military character, and Sexy Viper, who purposefully plays on effeminacy to indicate ambiguous sexuality, Comando’s fatigue-clad henchmen pinned Sexy Viper to the floor, allowing Comando to give him a nice long kiss. However, I never saw nor heard of any instance in which two female *luchadoras* kissed in the ring. Regardless of who was involved, these kisses were some of the most exciting moments for audience members, arousing laughter, chanting, and cheers. Kisses were not “romantic,” but were a mode of aggression using humiliation of the opponent. This convergence of eroticism and humiliation created an entry point for understanding how the deployment of power may be interpreted within Bolivian social contexts. This

specific mode of eroticism in the ring has broader consequences for traditional discursive constructions of Bolivian sexuality, heteronormativity, and hegemonic gender ideologies. Yet given that wrestling performances often draw their symbolic meaning from discourses already in broader circulation (Jenkins 2007: 84), they also tell us something about local understandings of power and its contestation.

Based on three different fieldwork periods between July of 2009 and January of 2013, I interviewed several of the *cholitas luchadoras*, as well as Bolivian *lucha libre* business owners, wrestling trainers, male *luchadores*, and audience members. I also trained as a *luchadora* for ten months, during which I participated in seven events and appeared on television as a *luchadora* at least a dozen times. Throughout this time, I was also a spectator at about thirty events, sitting among other audience members and experiencing *lucha libre* as closely as possible to their perspective. Hearing spectator reactions as I sat in the crowd, or even from within the ring, I began to understand the way audience and performers co-constructed these wrestling performance narratives.

Following Barthes (2000), Webley (1986), and Freedman (1983), I consider the audience a key part of wrestling performances and their interpretations as equally relevant as performer intentions. In essence, performance meaning is not that which the wrestlers intend, but that which the audience interprets. As such, this article tackles two types of language: the symbolic language of bodies in the ring and the discourses about that bodily action that audience members take up. Audience understandings in part determine the extent to which in-ring enactments of sexuality, gender performance, and eroticism diverge from heteronormative expectations. And indeed, as I demonstrate, while the language of wrestling performance may shift some forms of gender normativity, others remain in place. I follow Levi (1998: 278) in suggesting that a major theme of wrestling, in many instances, is the performance of machismo, in which one man or group of men struggle to “un-man” another. In this article I examine the performances of both men and women, but suggest that the particular history, sexual subjectivity, and gender construction of the *chola* character performed by women actually positions the characters as a symbol of the nation as a whole. So while the ways in which performers create associations between humiliation and demasculinization actually reinforce the potency of masculinity as a position of power, seeing the *chola* as representative of the Bolivian nations helps us to understand the ways that humiliation works as a recognizable trope for Bolivian audiences, lending import to these seemingly superficial performances.

1. The language of *lucha libre*

At first glance it may appear that language, as conventionally defined, plays a minimal role in *lucha libre*. Though announcers narrate and comment on action, wrestlers give short speeches, and the audience expresses support or disapproval through chanting and cheers, wrestling is primarily about the action that takes place between bodies in the ring. As Barthes acknowledges,

the body of the wrestler [is where] we find the key to the contest [...]. Wrestling is like a diacritic writing: above the fundamental meaning of [their] body, the wrestler arranges comments which are episodic but always opportune, and constantly help the reading of the fight by means of gestures, attitudes, and mimicry which make the intention utterly obvious. (Barthes 2000: 17–18)

The language of *lucha libre* is not confined to spoken words or textual practice. Communicative details are expressed in multi-modal fashions, and to focus only on the spoken word is to ignore the richness of the means through which messages about wrestling are being communicated. Exhibition wrestling, whether in Bolivia, the rest of South America, Mexico, the United States, Japan, or the South Pacific, by definition relies in part on the performativity that it brings to the sport. Bolivian *luchadores* utilize fictional storylines, humor enacted through the body, and performative violence in attracting and captivating audiences.¹

Though in-ring action is rarely choreographed move-by-move, the overarching action of the match is often contextualized by a pre-determined storyline, which gives the match meaning beyond the physical struggle of two anonymous bodies. Depending on the wrestling group, storylines may flow from week to week, in soap-opera style, or may be confined to a single match. In larger organizations they are usually developed by promoters or trainers, and in smaller groups may be left up to those involved in the match. But an important part of being a good wrestler is knowing what excites the audience and what does not. This means that any verbal or somatic language used within the match, even as it may be improvisation, is closely linked to a repertoire of performance choices that are well thought out and practiced.

In Bolivia, storylines often revolve around nationalism or patriotism, a critique of class relations, or moralistic conflicts faced by national symbolic characters (such as the *chola* or military general). At times, they cater to a more basic melodramatic morality involving fantasy characters and superheroes such as

1. I use the term “exhibition wrestling” rather than “professional wrestling” to highlight both the performative nature of the events, as well as the fact that often they are undertaken by amateurs and do not provide enough income to sustain a livelihood.

werewolves, clowns, and vampires. Such characters may support Barthes's contention that wrestling is not a sport, but pure spectacle. However, as Grindstaff and West (2006: 508–509) point out, theatrical aspects of performance are often placed in contrast to sport, but in athletic contests such as figure skating and gymnastics, planned performance for an audience is integral to the athletic activity. Moving away from debates over sport vs. spectacle or real vs. fake, Levi (1997: 61) suggests “all sport is drama, but wrestling is sport in the melodramatic mode.” Given that melodrama has long been a part of popular culture in Latin America, it is no surprise that *lucha libre* performances, which capitalize on melodramatic narratives, have become popular from Mexico to the Southern Cone.

Lucha libre storylines correspond closely with melodrama, with epic physical battles between good characters (*técnicos*) and evil characters (*rudos*), trickery and switching of sides, as well as a false sense of rules that are rarely enforced fairly. Yet the catharsis offered by *lucha libre* is not simply in seeing the good characters win. Often fans enjoy the triumph of the *rudos* (which happens in about half of the matches). Indeed, it is the way real social tensions are taken up by wrestling that gives them meaning to audiences (see Jenkins 2007: 84).

In essence, wrestling is a performance that employs the language of the body in order to communicate something about power, violence, and intimacy, not just within the ring, but also in reference to broader social formations. As Levi writes,

The roles of the wrestlers are written in their physique; holds and pins are used not to elicit conventional signs of defeat but to dramatize suffering and abasement of the vanquished; rules exist to be exploited. Each sign in wrestling must be absolutely clear because, according to Barthes, wrestling portrays “an ideal understanding of things” and corresponds not to other sports but to Greek drama.

(Levi 1997: 58)

The message is complex, yet as Barthes points out, the language relies on simplified signs, allowing the audience to use contextual cues to aid in their interpretations.

Rather than analyzing text in the traditional sense, I look at language as it is tied to spoken words and phrases, but also consider embodiment, costumes, gesture, posture, physical context, spatiality, audience call-out, and visual images as forms of communication. Yet, just as in written or spoken language, local contexts, histories, and political processes are integral to how these multi-modal forms of communication are interpreted.

2. Wrestling and audience on the Altiplano

The kisses that I discuss in this article were all performed by the group *Titanes del Ring* [“Titans of the Ring”], the largest and most established of five *lucha libre* groups in La Paz. *Titanes del Ring* performs each Sunday afternoon at an arena in El Alto, a city that sits on the rim of the altiplano, or high plain, overlooking La Paz in the valley below. While La Paz is a city with a highly heterogeneous population and functions as the national capital, El Alto is characterized as its indigenous and working-class counterpart.

Though crowds often filled the 500-seat arena in El Alto, as well as smaller arenas in working-class neighborhoods in La Paz, events were never staged in middle-class or wealthy neighborhoods because such places had no strong fan base. Wrestling in Bolivia, as in most of the world, is very much a classed form of entertainment, disparaged by most individuals in elite and even middle classes for its performative violence and ambiguous position between contest and staged performance. In many ways, *lucha libre* in Bolivia can only be understood through attention to the very neighborhoods in which it is performed — working class sectors of La Paz and El Alto.

El Alto was originally part of La Paz, but became officially recognized as its own municipality in 1988, though it had been recognized as an indigenous city long before (Lazar 2008: 31). In the census of 2011, 76% of residents identified as Aymara and another 9% as Quechua, the two major indigenous groups of the area. But indigeneity in Bolivia is much more than a racial category, as indigenous peoples are more likely to identify with the historical inequalities of colonialism. Since the indigenous rights movements of the 1970s, and intensifying since the 2005 election of indigenous-identified President Evo Morales,² indigeneity has been at the center of important social issues in Bolivia, in particular demands for cultural recognition and territorial rights (Postero 2007: 41).

New discourses of multiculturalism and pluriethnic nationalism have recently framed Bolivia as a nation of diverse parts making up an integrated whole (Canessa 2006: 246), and being “indigenous” has carried enormous material consequences, such as funding for development and access to land and resources (Postero 2007: 11). Thus, strategic representations of indigeneity have abounded, meaning that when *luchadoras* began wrestling as *cholitas* in 2001, theirs was just one of a proliferation of visible depictions of indigenous peoples.

Despite advances under the Morales administration, Bolivia remains one of the poorest economies in the hemisphere, and indigenous and working-class people experience poverty most intensely. Neoliberal structural adjustment of the

2. See Albro (2006: 417) for a discussion on criticisms of Morales’s claims to indigeneity.

1980s effectively forced thousands of government workers out of jobs, cut social services, and privatized a number of resources so that Bolivians paid higher rates for their basic survival needs. The resulting economic crisis of the 1990s disproportionately affected rural areas, lower classes, and people of indigenous origins (Kohl 2002: 449), meaning that people in places like El Alto are often marginalized citizens of an already disadvantaged nation.

Most performers and spectators of *lucha libre* were people who had grown up and continue to live within the conditions described here. They not only were negatively affected by economic conditions in Bolivia, but also have endured forms of stigmatization and discrimination from the elite minority of the country based on being working class, indigenous, or even living in marginal neighborhoods. This similarity between performers' and spectators' social subjectivity is important because as Bauman and Briggs (1990: 69) point out, contextualization of performance requires a negotiation in which performers assess the significance of emerging discourse in relation to "communicative competence, personal histories, and social identities" of their audience to shape the reception of meaning. Meaning and interpretation exist not in a vacuum, but as part of the context in which the performance is created and communicated, and the space of El Alto frames these performances through experiences of marginalization.

3. Bolivian characters in *lucha libre*

Marginalization is a discourse inherently bound to the symbol of the *chola* and thus is a subtext in the *cholitas luchadoras'* performances. Though *chola* may be used as a racially disparaging term, many women are proud to identify as such, particularly in the era of the Evo Morales presidency. To (over)simplify a complex cultural icon, *cholitas* represent mixture — they are *mestizas* (of mixed indigenous and European ancestry), travel through and between rural spaces and urban centers, are powerful for their economic connections as marketwomen, yet are still subject to inequalities and stigma associated with their race and gender. In contemporary Bolivia, as in much of Latin America, race is conflated with class, location, education, and other factors of lived experience. Language, education, occupation, and wealth are just as central to racial categorization as skin color (de la Cadena 2001: 16). *Cholitas* in some ways confound racialization within these contexts. They are known for being assertive and even aggressive, while are simultaneously romanticized as the tranquil traditional women who appear on postcards or in old stories and poems. And while there is some cultural capital to be gained through *cholitas'* ability to maneuver among different social spaces, there is also a stigma attached to them for never truly being "in place" (see Douglas 2005). Their

racial subjectivity, in colonial times made them desirable, as almost white, and sexually available to colonial men, because they were not quite white. This legacy lingers, as the *chola* plays the butt of countless dirty jokes, in which the *chola's* body is sexualized in order to degrade (Weismantel 2001:xxvii). These jokes often combine sexual provocation with bodily functions and odors, simultaneously titillating and repulsing. These jokes combine the eroticism of the *chola* with foul odors and uncleanness often associated with the bodies of working-class *mestizo* and indigenous people in Bolivia, which buttress the treatment of such people as innately filthy and bearers of disease.

Though *criollo* [Spanish descended] elites make up a small minority in Bolivia, where 74% of citizens identify as indigenous, they still retain significant control over wealth and political power. These elites, whose ancestry and lived experience has little in common with working-class and indigenous residents of El Alto, are likely to valorize the icon of the *chola* as a romanticized and exoticized Other, while continuing to stigmatize real indigenous women and marketwomen. These mixed treatments may seem paradoxical, but work in the same way as European descended United States citizens' valorization of native North Americans as protectors of the environment and spiritual guides, while simultaneously disparaging them for a presumed predisposition to alcoholism and poverty. Similar to indigenous people around the world, the *chola* is easily valorized through romanticism while disparaged as the scapegoat for a range of political and social ills.

But in Bolivia the non-elite make up the vast majority, and for many working-class and indigenous Bolivians (and plenty of middle class urban Bolivians as well), the *chola* is a national symbol combining the romanticism of pastoralism with involvement in social movements. Bolivian indigenous women have participated in revolutionary movements since the first anticolonial struggles. In the beginning of the twentieth century, *chola* women were well recognized as instrumental in the formation of trade unions and social movements aimed at full citizenship rights for indigenous peoples. Seligman (1993:202) calls women who identified as *chololas* in the mid-1900s "legendary figures of working-class political solidarity," noting their participation in neighborhood organizations and communal kitchens in addition to the unions. It was during this time that the *pollera* skirt itself became associated with both indigenous subjectivity and labor reform (Stephenson 1999:32). Further, working-class women's politicization extended beyond labor organizing to their personal lives, in which many rejected institutions such as marriage. They also resisted notions of motherhood that would have relegated them to the domestic sphere. They often earned more than their male partners working in the public arena of the marketplace or as domestic employees in other people's homes (Stephenson 1999:29). Their economic independence and public presence placed them outside of the normative idealized gender subjectivity of the time. Yet

the *chola* also brings to the fore the racial dimension of sexual oppression in the Andes (Weismantel 2001: xxxix), where white men's access to nonwhite women's bodies was part of colonial and postcolonial privilege. The eroticism associated with the *chola* remains clear in folkloric dances featuring sexy *cholitas* in short *polleras* and other sorts of media that represent the *chola* as a sexual object (see Albro 2000).

The *chola's* history in many ways parallels the history of indigenous people in Bolivia. She has been marginalized, disenfranchised, stigmatized, and exploited for both labor and sex. She has also been promoted as a depoliticized symbol of an ideal national pastoralism. Yet throughout this history she has been a powerful force of protest and labor reform as well as a symbol of positive possibilities for marginalized people.

Yet what I have described here is the imaginary ideal of the *chola* and may not correspond to individuals' lived experiences, whether they identify as a *chola* or others categorize them as such. As Albro (2000: 69) points out, the widely circulating image of the *chola* has been divorced from the real *chola* marketwomen, who have historically been political agents. Thus, I have taken care in this article to distinguish among using "the *chola*" when referring to the icon or character, "*chola*" or "*cholitas*" when referring to women who identify themselves as such, "*cholitas luchadoras*" when writing about the wrestling characters, and "*luchadoras*" when referring to the women who wrestle, whether they perform as a *chola* character or not. While one might feel the urge to simplify this explanation to say that these are "indigenous" wrestling characters, this terminology is equally problematic. Some of the *luchadoras* identify as *mestiza*, some as indigenous, and some as *cholitas*. Some wear blue jeans and sweaters on most days; others wear *polleras* and bowler hats, even while running errands in central La Paz. But even for those who may dress like a *chola* in daily life, it is still important to see the ways they act in the ring as *character* representations, rather than subject positions. Indeed, for most viewers, wrestling's theatricality is apparent. Though they are real women inhabiting bodies that feel pain and sustain injury through the performance, the personalities and identities communicated to the crowd are fictional.

4. Evaluating eroticism and humor in *lucha libre*

The historical association of the *chola* with assertion and political empowerment makes the icon an appropriate inspiration for *lucha libre* characters, but the eroticism of the *chola* is equally central to the *chola's* currency in the wrestling ring. Avid fans know that expressions of erotic display are always just beneath the surface. Woo and Kim (2003: 365) note that televised wrestling shows frequently

include sexual undertone, and Hoang (2004) makes a provocative link between martial arts films and pornography wherein he focuses on both the fight and performed sex as choreographed moments in which masculinization is made evident.

Wrestling in fact may fit into the film “genres of excess,” a category in which Linda Williams (1991) includes horror, pornography, and melodrama. Audiences often assess these genres as having low cultural status because “the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen” (Williams 1991: 4). *Lucha libre* combines aspects of all three of these film types. The enacted violence of the ring reflects the gratuitous violence of horror films, and both Levi (2008) and Jenkins (2007) point to the melodramatic nature of the extreme good and evil portrayed in exhibition wrestling. Similarly, scholars such as Messner, Duncan, and Cooky (2003) and Rahilly (2005) note the ways that intimate contact of bodies in exhibition wrestling, and sometimes explicit sexually charged scenarios, can be read as pornographic. Indeed, wrestling necessitates intimate bodily contact. In many wrestling contexts such as the United States and Mexico, women’s bodies become sexualized through their costuming, which often appear similar to erotic dancing costumes. Similarly, some fans enjoy wrestling precisely for the same-sex eroticism of two men in tight clothing engaged in close bodily contact. Yet most viewers interpret hypermasculine bodies of wrestlers as overtly heterosexual, unless expressly performed otherwise (see Mazer 1998, Soulliere 2006). Under a similar heteronormative logic, the pornographic nature of wrestling matches between men and women is even more evident. In the Bolivian context, the close bodily contact, the strangeness of cross-gender matches, and the notion of the *chola* as a sexually charged symbol suggest the association of wrestling with pornography is not a far stretch.

Many scholars confirm that the primary role of women within wrestling has been to provide sexualized or comedic interludes (see Beekman 2006:30–31). While different than in the United States or Mexico, corporeal differences between men and women become a focal point in Bolivian wrestling in various ways. Most commonly, the *luchadoras* kick their male opponents or the referee between the legs. They also often grab their opponent’s groin to pull him forward or push him into the corner of the ropes (Figure 2). In the kicking version of this strategy, often three people are involved — sometimes including the referee. A man-woman team places the third person, usually a *luchadora*, in a hold in which her head is trapped between the knees of the man as he stands in the ring corner. The *luchadora* who is teamed with the man backs up in preparation to kick the woman who was trapped. But inevitably, at the last moment, the woman breaks free and moves, so that the kick is delivered directly to the man’s groin. He then writhes on the floor while the two women continue to grapple.



Figure 2. Antonia Grabs the groin of the referee (Titanes del Ring, 9 August 2009) [Copyright: Nell Haynes]

In other instances, the *luchadoras* play on specific stereotypes about *cholas*, such as the widely known joke that a stench emanates from below the *chola's pollera* (Weismantel 2001:260). *Luchadoras* lift their skirt, either toward the referee or their opponent, who then clutches his throat, stumbles backward, and feigns asphyxiation (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Fiera vs. Claudina (Titanes del Ring, 17 April 2011) [Copyright: Nell Haynes]

Undergarments are also prominently featured in matches. As physics dictates, when a wrestler wearing a pollera is flipped or pinned to the mat with her legs aloft, the skirt succumbs to the laws of gravity and her undergarments are exposed. While women wearing skirts in other sports such as tennis, cheerleading, or field hockey have uniforms that include somewhat modest bloomers, the



Figure 4. Sexy Viper and Jennifer Pin Antonia with her undergarments exposed (Titanes del Ring, 19 July 2009) [Copyright: Nell Haynes]

luchadoras often wear undergarments that attract attention with bright colors or animal prints, as if they are intended to be seen (Figure 4).

But this strategy is not exclusive to women's underwear. Sometimes the men's undergarments are exposed as well. On a number of occasions, I saw the *luchadoras* pull down their male opponents' pants, usually revealing equally flashy underwear. Often, the humor was based not only on the exposure of the underwear, but also that it was flashy and they fumbled excessively before effectively re-dressing themselves (Figure 5). With their pants around their ankles, they often tripped sending their barely-clad (sometimes only in a G-string) buttocks into the air or audience members' faces.

These jokes are usually audience favorites, with laughter erupting from the crowd. Yet some wrestlers see them as cheap tricks that damage the reputation of *lucha libre* among the broader public and on an international level (see Haynes 2013). There is a divide between wrestlers who rely on comedy and narratives tied to their characters, and those who rely on their agility as acrobatic wrestlers. While all performers are skilled and both types are present in all of the groups in La Paz, at times there are tensions between the two styles of wrestling. The style that privileges humor is almost always performed by wrestlers that have created "personality characters" — characters such as the *cholitas luchadoras*, along with werewolves, stoic mummies, ninjas, jail convicts in striped attire, military figures, mummies, superheroes, and horror film characters. Other wrestlers who rely



Figure 5. Sexy Viper struggles to pull his pants back up (Titanes del Ring, 19 July 2009)
[Copyright: Nell Haynes]

more on their agility dress in colorful spandex costumes and masks, with spectacular names like Golden Eagle or Mr. Atlas, but do not usually incorporate overtly performed theatrics in the ring. Instead they impress the audience with their flips and holds alone. These wrestlers are considered, at least among many within *lucha libre* circles, a local example of the venerated styles of wrestling found in Mexico, Japan, and the United States.

My own wrestling trainer, Edgar, part of the smaller Super Catch group, was among those who felt humor in wrestling was damaging to its reputation. After I had been training with him for six months, Edgar suggested we attend an event of another group in order to help me see alternative styles. As we watched the first match between agile wrestlers, Edgar commented to me that I should take note of their style and try to use what I learned to improve my own wrestling technique. But as subsequent matches unfolded with a dancing skeleton, a clown with balloons, and of course the *cholitas luchadoras*, Edgar started grumbling about the lack of skill these wrestlers displayed. Having spent several months learning new moves, I could understand the distinction he made between wrestling matches that were “*muy show*” and those that he considered more athletically legitimate. Even though both incorporate modes of performance, those that he equated with clowning [*payasadas*] focused on theatricality. In each of the character matches, very little time was spent on acrobatic moves. Most of the performances focused on interactions with the audience, and the humor of kicks to the groin, chairs to

the face, and even the clown miming tears as his opponent popped his balloons. When one *luchadora* dressed as a *chola* cornered a man and kissed him, Edgar exploded, *Que es esto? Es basura!* ["What is this? It's garbage!"]. After the event, as we rode a minibus down the steep mountain from El Alto back to the center of La Paz, Edgar asked me what I thought of the matches. Without giving me a chance to answer, he asked, *Son malas, no?* ["They're bad, aren't they?"]. I nodded in agreement, knowing now what he felt were the requirements for good wrestling and what he considered bad. *Es más show y menos lucha* ["It's more show and less wrestling"], I responded, trying to concur. He nodded approvingly. *Falta mucha técnica* ["It lacks a lot of technical skill"], he ended, as he turned to look out the minibus window.

It was important for me to demonstrate to my trainer that I could see the distinction between the two types of wrestling, and align myself with agile rather than comedic wrestling. Yet while he was concerned with technical skill and the reputation of Bolivian *lucha libre*, audience members are usually more entertained by humor than by the technical, agile wrestling. The in-ring kisses were certainly part of the humorous wrestling type, and perhaps were some of the most important examples, given their melding of humor, eroticism, and violence. The fact that such moments are the most compelling for audience members confirms that for many spectators, the pleasure in viewing *lucha libre* lies not in a desire for gratuitous brutality, but in the ways the genre connects to narrative. As Jenkins (2007) and Mazer (1998) argue, exhibition wrestling's popularity is a product of the ways it draws from, symbolizes, or comments upon real-life experiences of power differentials.

5. The kiss of humiliation

While violence outside of the wrestling ring is visible through its corporeal effects, within wrestling performances, violence must be made visible through symbolic action. Writhing and grimacing do some of this work in the moment, but to portray sustained physical dominance throughout the match, wrestlers often perform dynamics of humiliation. Humiliation is an important trope in wrestling, across many contexts, whether performed through spoken language or other forms of communication. Humiliation relies on allusions to honor and shame that are central to the narratives that give wrestling matches theatricality. As Cadena-Roa (2002:207) explains, "In wrestling, defeat comes along with public humiliation" (see also Henricks 1974: 183). Theatricality in the match relies on the drawing out of success and defeat, rather than a definitive moment in which one wrestler wins and the other loses. Because defeat is not momentary, but is performed throughout the match, suffering and humiliation are key to the display (see Barthes 2000:21).

In Latin American *lucha libre*, the importance of humiliation is best illustrated by the moments in which *luchadores* lose their masks. In essence, the mask represents the history, charisma, and power of the characters, or something akin to *mana* as discussed by Mauss (1972). A mask may be forcibly removed, in which case the unmasked wrestler will hide their face. “While it disqualifies the unmasker, it humiliates the unmasked” (Levi 1997:65). If a wrestler wages their mask against a rival or in a championship, the stakes are higher. Once the mask is lost, the wrestler’s face is exposed, and it is likely that their career, or at least the particular character, will crumble as a result. The domination of the unmasker over the unmasked wrestler is often spoken of in sexualized terms. For example, Jose Joaquin Blanco writes that removing an opponent’s mask is an attempt to “despoil the most cared for and coveted virginity on earth” (Blanco 1990:31, translation in Levi 1997:65). While the wrestler’s body is usually exposed — its form revealed by the tightness of the spandex costuming — the face is the one body part that must never be revealed. The wrestler’s identity is to be preserved at all costs, and someone who is able to remove such a precious covering violates them on multiple levels.

In this framework, kissing provides a form of emotional violence and an enactment of the power to violate or humiliate. A kiss amidst other action in the ring brings underlying eroticism to the fore. Though a kiss may seem tame to spectators like those in El Alto who are no strangers to global television programs and films that feature much more explicit forms of sexual content, the kiss is still symbolic of sexuality. In Linda Williams’s (2004:4) terms, this kiss is the on/scenity that stands in for the unspeakable, unrepresentable acts of obscenity. On/scenity represents the negotiation between performers and audience that creates “increased awareness of those once obscene matters that now peek out at us from under every bush” (Williams 2004:4).

Moments of kissing within Bolivian wrestling matches were clearly performed, not as a break from the physical violence in which opponents showed affection to one another, but as a part of that violence. Das (2008:286) points to Hobbesian notions of consent as the foundation for our understandings of violence, and focus on the importance of consent in sexual contact confirms its significance. Similarly, it is a lack of consent to be kissed within the performances that makes them readable as violence. This absence of consent is communicated through overt symbols — kicking or flailing arms, pushing away from the aggressor, and wiping the kiss away afterward.

While the kiss here is not “real” sexual intimacy and encounters between different wrestlers do not constitute a “real” form of violence, these symbolic performances of violence tell us just as much about cultural perceptions of violence as instances of violence such as military action or bar fights might reveal. Das and

Kleinman (2000: 16) suggest that violence must be studied as it is embedded in everyday life, institutions, and states, with Das (2008: 284) noting that, “the reality of violence includes its virtuality.” And wrestling is undoubtedly a spectacle of violence, “depending on the violent and sensual meeting of bodies in the ring.” (Sammond 2005: 7). Though this violence is symbolic, its presence within a popular culture form is important for understanding how violence is both produced and consumed. Thus, the production and consumption of *lucha libre* in general, as well as the ways violence, humiliation, and eroticism converge within it, may reveal broader understandings of violence for both those that produce and consume it.

The links between violence, humiliation, and women’s sexuality are evident in a number of social contexts. Linke (1999: 139) points out that Nazi soldiers forced Jewish women to strip before being shot into mass graves and often photographed their nudity as an act of humiliation before their murder. Women’s sexuality may even be used to humiliate the men in their community by “spoiling” them, or through abductions, forced marriages, and pregnancies, as in Bosnia-Herzegovina (see Das 2008: 291; Nagengast 1994: 121; Stephen 1999: 834; United Nations 2014: 80).

Many anthropologists also note the different contexts in which language does the work of humiliation though feminizing men. Pascoe (2011) writes about US high schools, where young men call their peers “fags.” She suggests this is not an act of overt homophobia, but rather relates more specifically to challenging claims to hegemonic masculinity through reference to a denigrated form of femininity. Wacquant (2011: 148) similarly describes how boxing gym coaches motivate their trainees to be more aggressive through humiliation by using feminine descriptors as in, “You look like a bunch of girls!” “You hit like a lady!” or even “Look at those fags!”

Within sports, this feminization may be used for motivation. But attempts to demasculinize have been used for more sinister pursuits in contexts such as imprisonment (Krishnaswamy 1998, Sinha 1995), lynching practices in the South of the United States (Austin 2004, Cardyn 2002), and civil warfare (Malkki 1995). Feldman (1991: 69) describes how paramilitary in Belfast used the word “cunt” to feminize their male victims, viewing the “cunt” as a passive object of the violence. Similarly, Stephen (1999: 832) writes of the Mexican judicial police’s sexual torture of Zapotec men, which included electric shock to the testicles. Police used this tactic to signify that they had these men “by the balls.” She explains: “Once demasculinized, they become feminine equivalents.” Sexualized violence thus accomplishes the dehumanization of the tortured, and it does so through forcibly erasing their masculinity (Razack 2005).

Perhaps most relevant to the discussion of kissing in *lucha libre* is Das’s (2008: 289–290) discussion of military personnel humiliating male Abu Ghraib

prisoners through nudity and effeminization, in part because many of the soldiers acting as perpetrators were women. Das (2008:290) suggests “the senses were trained so that American soldiers, both men and women, could take pleasure in these kinds of sexual humiliation inflicted on the other. After all, the pictures of torture that were circulated were not of grim soldiers performing a distasteful duty but of men and women taking pleasure in the sexual humiliation inflicted on the dominated other.” Razack (2005) points out that individuals who were subordinate within the military hierarchy carried out this type of torture, thus using the humiliation of others to claim inclusion within the hierarchy and embody dominant positions not usually available to them.

Certainly, the violence that is performed in the *lucha libre* rings of La Paz and El Alto does not have the same immediate consequences as these acts of torture, state violence, and warfare. It is instantiated for the pleasure of audiences as well as those performing in the ring. Nonetheless, its symbolism works in the same way, and the different forms cannot be treated as analytically distinct because they reinforce one another (see Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004).

These kisses are performances of power, as evidenced by clearly indicated movements that communicate the kisser’s use of force and restraint as well as the kissee’s desire to fight back. The party who is unwillingly kissed is backed into a corner of the ropes. The kisser either creates a barrier with their own body to prohibit escape or actually restrains the kissee’s body with their arms and hands. And perhaps most importantly, the kissee kicks their feet or flails their arms to indicate an inability but desire to fight back. Afterward, they wipe their face to show disgust at what has just happened, thus affirming that it was not mutually desired.

Hollander (2001) argues that widely shared conceptions of gender associate femininity with vulnerability and masculinity with dangerousness. So while several different gender combinations have occurred in these in-ring kisses, they work to instantiate gender subjectivity in the same ways. Hollander (2001: 84) references “shared beliefs” about gendered bodies wherein because of smaller average size, perceived lack of strength, and physical exposure to rape, feminine bodies are understood as vulnerable while masculine bodies are larger in size, have greater strength, and can potentially be used as a tool of sexual violence. To be humiliated and vulnerable to the kiss works to feminize the kissee. Thus, they are vulnerable not just to sexual advances, but to violence in general and therefore within the context, symbolically become the weaker *luchador*. To be a kisser is to be the aggressor, the masculine opponent, and thus claim symbolic aspects associated with being a capable *luchador*. Though in some ways painting women as aggressors or men as victims may destabilize gender expectations on the surface, it also normalizes the positive valuations of masculinity and power, and construes both femininity and vulnerability as undesirable. Masculinity and femininity do not

necessarily adhere strictly to male and female bodies in this case, but rather stand in as symbolic of winner and loser.

But more than associate masculinity with power, these performances also reveal the ways that an absence or failure of masculinity is equated with femininity, as is clear in other Bolivian contexts. In Bolivia's obligatory military service, feminine appearance and behavior are used as punishments for soldiers who fail physically or desert. Some men are made to dress up as women and publically perform chores associated with women, such as sweeping. Canessa writes that his friend explained his experience in the Bolivian army:

Yes, there are those who cannot take it, and they get kicked and beaten. And so as not to suffer any longer they escape but they get caught. They are caught and dressed with a pollera, a manta [shawl], and a sign is put on them which says 'I am a woman', that is what is written: 'I am a woman because I cannot take it in the army'. And that is how they make them go [publicly] around the streets [...]. You see, women don't go into the army, so if you cannot take it then you are like a woman. 'You are a woman; you cannot take it', they say, 'men go into the army; but you have to dress like a woman'.
(Canessa 2008: 52)

These wrestling matches then instantiate this ideology found in countless contexts, in which a lack of masculinity is equated with femininity, whether that means one "is like a woman," or one has "failed as a man." When a woman is forcibly kissed, her powerlessness and thus femininity is made apparent. When a man is kissed he is exposed as equally powerless and thus his masculinity fails. Das's (2008) discussion, among the others, leads us back to the kiss as something perpetrated not only by men on women, or men on men, but also by women toward men. In the context of these other symbolically laden forms of violence and humiliation, a woman forcibly kissing a man in the wrestling ring should not be understood as an empowering act in which she claims force through reversing gender roles. Rather, it is a claim toward inclusion within the current forms of gendered ideologies that understand aggression, forcefulness, and domination as the domain of masculinity. Thus, any "empowerment" to be gained comes at the expense of misrecognition (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2011). Symbolic violence within the ring cannot be separated from the everyday violences of sexual assault, domestic abuse, or general misogyny, still common and visible in the Bolivian context (see Foundation for Sustainable Development n.d.). It simply occupies a part of a continuum of violence whose function is to maintain the status quo, reinforce systems of oppression, and make them seem natural.

6. Shouts from the audience

Adherence to gendered ideologies which equate a lack of masculinity with femininity is clear from audience reactions as well. Upon seeing a woman kiss a man in the ring, the audience often erupts into chants of *maricón*. *Maricón* very much has the connotation of “faggot,” and specifically the passive partner in a sexual relationship between two men (see Wright 2000: 92). But as several audience members explained to me, *maricón* can also simply mean something along the lines of “sissy” or “wimp” (see also Pascoe 2011). The word may not specifically be used as a homophobic slur, but certainly retains a reference to failure at hegemonic heterosexual masculinity, and is thus associated with femininity.

Audiences then understand that the kiss indeed works to demasculinize the person who is kissed and thus erases their power within the ring, much as losing their mask would. The audience responses here are particularly important because they reveal the ways not just performers but the public more broadly may associate these performances with particular ideological discourses already in circulation.

While Goffman (1959: 22) defines performance as any activity that has influence on observers, Hymes (1981: 82) more specifically insists that performance must be instantiated by members of a community that have access to folk knowledge. The folk knowledge in this case is an understanding of the gender expectations and valuations common among the Bolivian public. It includes actions such as that described by Canessa’s ex-military friend above, as well as understandings of the multiple meanings the *chola* characters evoke. On the surface, the audience’s shouting of *maricón* when a woman kisses a man — indeed an explicitly heterosexual act — seems contradictory. But the inflections of power, humiliation, demasculinization, and the symbol of the *chola* within the social context makes it quite the logical response.

These audience members, then, act as “co-authors” (Duranti 1986), effectively negotiating the meaning of the performance along with the wrestlers (Flower 1994). Particularly in *lucha libre*, where wrestlers may standardize performance techniques that they see are audience favorites, audiences exert influence over the cultural forms instantiated in performance (see Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte & Cain 1998: 18). When a woman is kissed by a man, most often the audience hisses and boos, as the *cholitas luchadoras* are usually the most loved characters. When they are kissed it is a moment in which they are humiliated; thus the audience reacts with the sort of pleasurable displeasure that one feels when yelling “don’t go into the dark basement!” while watching a horror movie. Yet there are no shouts that make reference to gender, because a masculine body forcing a sexual move on a feminine body is expected within the context. When a man is forcibly kissed the audience calls him a *maricón* in order to interpolate his position as lacking the

power and masculinity of a penetrative sexual partner. When that kiss comes from another man, it is interpreted as an act of humiliation rather than a sexual act. Just as in many Latin American same-sex male partnerships, the kisser is understood as dominant and retains his masculinity, while only the kissee is considered to lose his claim to masculine subjectivity.

The feminization associated with being kissed thus differs from the way Levi (1998) characterizes the femininity of Mexican *exoticos*, or cross-gendered *lucha libre* performers. According to Levi (1998), *exoticos* are able to successfully disrupt the equation in which to be (symbolically) penetrated signifies submission and a loss of power. She (1998: 279) writes that they are not loathed or ridiculed, but treated as serious wrestlers. When they are called *maricones*, it is often in the context of “arriba los maricones!” [hooray for the faggots!] (Levi’s translation). Yet Mexican audiences are not necessarily less homophobic. Male wrestlers who are put in submission holds are often called “*culero*” by the audience — a term that literally means idiot who allows himself to be anally penetrated — and one audience member described a victor as making the loser “his woman” (Levi 1998: 278). However, the *exoticos* destabilize the link between domination and masculinity by using signifiers of femininity, such as frilly bathing suits and lipstick, while maintaining their role as serious wrestlers who are capable of upending the masculinity of other “real” men in the match, problematizing the ring as a masculine space (Levi 1998: 282).

The difference here is that while the *exoticos* of which Levi writes are taken seriously, the in-ring kisses of Bolivian wrestling are part of the farcical humor of the spectacle. The kisses may destabilize masculinity within the moment, but even when perpetrated by a woman against a man, they still work to reinforce the association between domination and masculinity and between humiliation and feminization. In essence, these reversals are possible simply because of the humorous nature of the performance. Humor allows for play with different possible realities, yet is only humorous to audience members if they experience it as nonthreatening to the core values at stake (Ritchie 2005: 288). The in-ring kisses do not challenge the core normative gender ideologies, as they align with domination; thus they may be experienced as a humorous reversal, but not as a serious challenge to the naturalization of these associations.

7. Conclusion

George Simmel (1971: 127–140) suggests the dynamics of society are often most clearly reflected in its forms of play. It is no surprise then, that we see dominant gender ideologies instantiated in the wrestling ring. Exhibition wrestling, both in

Bolivia and in most places around the world, presents masculinity in a culturally ideal form (see Atkinson 2002, Cherry 2002, Jhally & Katz 2002, Mazer 1998, Soulliere 2006, and Stroud 2001). What makes the case of the *cholitas luchadoras* important is the way the trope of the *chola*, understood by the viewing audience as a politicized national symbol, is deployed within these forced kisses. The symbol of the *chola* makes the kisses intelligible to the audience, humorous and entertaining, as well as a reflection of the marginalized position of Bolivia, and particularly indigenous and working class citizens, in relation to the world.

The kinds of humor that are prominent in the wrestling ring are what Ritchie (2005: 277) terms “aggressive” humor, which allows for enjoyment when the audience experiences a “flash of recognition” that momentarily allows full awareness of something that is well-known but suppressed. The audience is briefly allowed to acknowledge the joke’s basis in reality without fully condoning the ideology behind the aggression (Ritchie 2005: 281). Thus, these kisses allow the audience to acknowledge the fact that eroticism, humiliation, and violence are often connected through deployments of power, yet still act as a source of comedic pleasure.

The character of the *chola*, considered by so many Bolivians to symbolize the nation, may allow audiences to envision scenarios in which the disadvantaged or disempowered nation speaks back to global powers. The *chola* as a symbol represents the historical sexual exploitation, humiliation, and violence — both physical and emotional — enacted upon indigenous women. When she is forcibly kissed in the ring, the narrative is familiar. When she kisses a man, the narrative is reversed, calling upon the duality of the *chola* as both marginalized and powerful. Much like the military personnel of Abu Ghraib that Das (2008) and Razack (2005) discuss, the *chola* as a character takes on the position of the powerful Other within the kissing narrative.

As Jenkins (2007: 84) writes, the matches “draw symbolic meaning by borrowing stereotypes already in broader circulation.” Audiences understand that a large part of real-world conflict is not simply physical violence but the humiliation and emotionally charged degradation that those in power are able to exert. Humiliation is a popular trope in discourses related to Bolivianness. President Evo Morales often refers to the historic humiliation of the nation in speeches. Howard writes of a speech from 6 August 2006 in which Morales addresses the audience as follows: “Now we are all here, all together to change that mistreated Bolivia, those humiliated peoples, those discriminated peoples, despised [...]” (quoted in Howard 2010: 181). Similarly, Albro (2005: 436) quotes a Morales speech from 2003, before he became president, in which he declared protests over gas resources successful, stating, “What has happened in recent days in Bolivia is a great revolt, after being humiliated for more than 500 years.” A similar formation is used in the song “Bolivia” by the popular political music group Los Kjarkas. “To be the

bravery, the strength, and youth / The awakening and voice of your mute lethargy / Bolivia! / I want to shout liberation after a century and half of humiliation” (quoted in Céspedes 1993:79). These public discourses of humiliation correspond to the colonial era and following *hacienda* system under which indigenous Bolivians were “abused, humiliated and made to do menial services” (Canessa 2009:180), meaning the trope of humiliation and degradation is already well used in discourses with which the audience is familiar.

While the performance of humiliation through kissing in the ring may allow both performers and audiences to claim (or at least envision) inclusion in the formations of global power, is not necessarily a performative choice that is without negative consequences. After all, as Dwight Conquergood (1986: 36–37) contends, performance does not necessarily begin with experience, but often performance *realizes* the experience (emphasis in original). Thus, these performances realize the experience of understanding one’s own subject position as being represented in a humorous genre. The performers actively construct these performances and understand the stereotypes and stigmas with which they are playing. But they may not fully acknowledge the ways this performance may further subordinate their own subject positions, as well as reinforce other forms of violence against them. This may represent a form of misrecognition in which those subordinate in the power structure reinforce their subjectivization by naturalizing the social order (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:162–173, 200–205; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004) or perhaps even the “bad faith” that Sartre (1956) describes in the ways that individuals may bury, avoid, or joke through disturbing aspects of their social realities.

Within wrestling matches, the *cholitas luchadoras* characters stand in as a symbol of the nation, sometimes experiencing, but at other times perpetrating the humiliation so closely associated with Bolivianness. Even when being forcibly kissed, they exhibit signs of resistance, echoing the forms of protest and political resistance enacted by women who historically inhabited the *chola* subject position. Winning is not just about physical dominance, but about the power to humiliate as well. And the audience draws pleasure from seeing their own social worlds reflected back at them from this squared stage. The spectators’ continued pleasure at a spectacle of violent sexuality, even when its real world correlate is very much a topic of public discussion, should not be read as insensitivity. Rather, it simply joins the myriad ways that audience members understand violence as encompassing various forms of the deployment of power. For the working class citizens of El Alto and La Paz, these connections are always clear in daily life. As Williams (1991:12) reminds us, “Genres thrive, after all, on the persistence of the problems they address; but genres thrive also in their ability to recast the nature of these problems.”

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