

Wrestling Luchadoras and Female Masculinities

La Comandante



This essay explores aspects of femininity by linking them to forms of masculinity. In doing so I am using Judith Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998) to try to explore other forms of masculinity and female masculinity that take place in lucha libre in Mexico. In particular, I will take a closer look at two luchadoras: La Comandante, who had her debut in 1995 and also fought under the name La Nazi (1995-2009), and Martha Villalobos, who had her debut in 1979. They do not simply repeat the normative roles assigned to women, nor do they merely imitate masculinity to abuse and dominate

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The image above by Lourdes Grobet from 2009, shows La Comandante still in her outfit as La Nazi. She looks proud and content standing in front of a wall in which a painting of El Santo, updated with a mobile in his hand, can be seen. As she points at him she makes a direct reference to his legacy and possibly positions herself as an heir. Moreover, by taking on the same pose as El Santo on the wall, she allows both their bodies to be compared: they have almost the same height and are similarly built. In a conversation with me, La Comandante made clear that she considers her body to be 'already almost like one of a man', and if she would have kept on going to the gym, to build her muscles with weights, she "[would be] totally a man". It was her mother's comment "You aren't a woman anymore, you are

a man" (Translation from Spanish: "Tú ya no eres una mujer, eres un hombre") that kept her from bodybuilding more. La Comandante's mother considered her daughter's training, which caused visible changes in her appearance, as endangering of her femininity. She could not envision her daughters' gender equivocation as a possible mode of identification. It seems however, that La Comandante did not turn away from her own masculinity but rather decided not to pursue it far enough, to become "totally a man". "Far from being an imitation of maleness", Halberstam claims, "female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity". The example of La Comandante exemplifies how much a person's physiognomy declares her or him to fall masculinity or femininity. There are signs of masculinity, among them the body's appearance,

Martha Villalobos



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which obviously bespeak masculinity. These signs can also be achieved through training, as in the case of La Comandante, or by taking chemical substances such as hormones, anabolic steroids and potency pills, changing diet or hygiene, undergoing surgery, altering style or fashion, repeating poses and gestures, and other means employed by female-, male-, and trans-gender-born people. As such, it is impossible to reduce certain signs—for example, a built physique, power and strength—only to male-born people.

The image above by Grobet from 1991, shows a powerful and built body that is not obviously that of a woman but that is obviously not that of a man. The face has no facial hair and the chest gives a hint of breasts. The arms are up in the air, the wrestler is about to untangle the leg and seems to be about to scream to let the opponent, the public, the viewer, know that she can rage, that she can fight, that she can win. She is the luchadora Martha Villalobos, who came to be a champion on several occasions. In relation to her physical appearance she once explained that:
Now with the time and for the lucha I had to gain weight, although I went too far. Anyway, my character was liked as I'm very fight, I'm incredibly agile, and that's an important part of my success; not anyone handles this weight nor moves like me in the ring, even more so being a woman.

Her comment makes the tension of being a strong, corpulent woman obvious. On the one hand it has marked her success but on the other hand it is unusual for a woman to handle such weight. According to Halberstam, however, not all versions of female masculinity give rise to unease. Popular culture applauds figures of sexy and confident female masculinity gender transgression as long as they are heterosexual. Female masculinity becomes provocative however, when it is linked to the intimation of non-normative sexuality that might lead to no reproduction. As the following words from Villalobos clarify, luchadoras, due to their activities, were confronted with a general presumption that they could not reproduce: "It's a lie that luchadoras cannot procreate, it's wrong. Within the scene there are many luchadoras who are mums". Throughout her career Villalobos was confronted with questions regarding her sexual orientation that could be read as yet another threat to reproduction. In 1992 she made clear that: *I respect everyone's private life, and if I were a lesbian I wouldn't deny it, because it's my life and no one [...] has the right to deny what I am. If I were a lesbian, I would accept it. [...] Right now, today, I don't consider myself in this case, but if I were, I'd scream it out loud proudly, because one's not doing it on purpose, so many people are born that way by deficiency. Today, to be appalled by homosexuality, because of the machismo that exists in Mexico, is just stupid. Unfortunately people cannot love, they don't know how to respect the life of any human being...*

According to her words, Villalobos considered being lesbian a deficiency, even though she regards being aghast at homosexuality as stupid. Thirteen years later, however, in 2005, at the Primer Festival Lésbico de la Ciudad de México (First Lesbian Festival of Mexico City), she supported the campaign *Contra la violencia entre mujeres* (Against Violence Between Women). On September 23, 2009, she announced in the magazine *TV y Novelas*, that her partner was a woman. Together they raise two boys from former relationships. In the interview she clarified: "I don't have a reason to hide my nature, but I'm not going to tell it to everyone. Currently, I am happy, very happy, I have my own life with my partner and my two children." Halberstam suggests that the "widespread indifference to [and avoidance of] female masculinity [...] has sustained the complex social structures that pair masculinity with maleness, power and dominance." This is why I consider it to be important to discuss the different masculinities—and here I position La Comandante and Villalobos as examples—that have the potential to destabilize this pairing, and to make it clear that masculinity is constructed by female- and trans-gender- as much as by male-born people.

This article is a shorter and revised version of a chapter in my PhD thesis (2012), which I wrote at the Department of Art at Goldsmiths University of London, and of the one which will appear in Spanish and in two parts (April and August 2014) in *Cuadrivlo* <http://cuadrivlo.net/>.

Lucha Libre

Lucha libre refers to professional wrestling involving varied techniques and moves. On September 21, 1933 lucha libre had its debut in Mexico City. Since the 40s *exóticos* and *luchadoras*, with their first masked luchadora La Dama Enmascarada in the 50s, are part of the luchas. Even though luchadoras weren't allowed to fight in Mexico City's arenas from 1957 to 1987 they kept on wrestling outside the capital. *Exótico* is used to describe male wrestlers, the majority of them are gay, who cross-dress and/or display mannerisms usually coded as female. The term *exótico* is related to the term *raro*, a commonly used word that roughly translates as "queer".

Reading recommendations: Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998. // a. Facinero, Lola M. *Sin Máscara ni Cabellos. Lucha Libre en México hoy*. México D.F.: Marc Ediciones S.A. de C.V., 1992. // a. Palmer, Laura Luz. 2009. "La luchadora Martha Villalobos reconoce: "Mi pareja es una mujer." In *TV y Novelas*. México D.F.: Editorial Televisa.

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