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Review/Reseña

Heather Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

A Culture of Contradiction: Spectacle and Sport in Contemporary Mexico

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In her work, *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity*, Heather Levi set out not only to decode one of contemporary Mexico's most popular cultural traditions, but to become a practitioner of it as well. Mexican professional wrestling is at once a physically demanding endeavor and a socially significant expression of national identity. In this entertaining work of cultural anthropology, Levi suggests that "*lucha libre* makes sense because it is a performance genre that draws on and reproduces a series of contradictions that are broadly

intelligible in the context of the shared historical and cultural background of its Mexican fans” (xiii). In making this claim, Levi inserts herself and her work into the rich and varied literature on the centrality of contradiction in the Mexican tradition. Levi takes it as her thesis and uses it as an organizing schema of her work.

The World of Lucha Libre focuses on five central contradictions in Mexican wrestling and Mexican life; “rural and urban, tradition and modernity, ritual and parody, machismo and feminism, politics and spectacle” (xiii). *Lucha libre* provides commentary on each. The rural versus urban, traditional versus modern, and male versus female polarities addressed in the text are familiar to students of Mexican culture and history and to that understanding Levi adds interesting and nuanced discussions of these dynamics in the complex arena of Mexican professional wrestling. The family and community dynamics at work in wrestlers’ lives, career paths, and professional personas, for example, reveal much about individual responses to the substantive shifts that have occurred in Mexican society since *lucha libre*’s inception. Similarly, the modernizing agenda so advanced by Mexican politicians through sport is reflected in the evolution, professionalization, and commercialization of *lucha libre*. The ritual versus parody and politics versus spectacle axes in *lucha libre* are less familiar and here too Levi makes a welcome contribution to the scholarship on the workings of the cultural, social, and political power relations that govern Mexican national life. Her analyses of *Superbarrio* and the not-so-secret secret at the heart of *lucha libre* find resonance in the socio-political realities of contemporary Mexico.

At the outset of the text, Levi situates her study of *lucha libre* within the context of the aftermath of the devastating 1985 earthquake and the emergence of *Superbarrio*. Masking traditions, public perceptions of political malfeasance, the disastrous impact of the 1985 quake, and the powerful example of *lucha libre* come together in Levi’s analysis of the farcical yet serious costumed political crusader. *Superbarrio* was part superhero, part *luchador* in his persona and at once an object of ridicule and a source of fear for the Mexican political establishment. Thus, for Levi,

he serves as the perfect analytical bridge between the world of sport/entertainment and that of politics/governance.

Similarly, Levi's treatment of the public secret so central to *lucha libre* operates on both literal and symbolic levels. In addition to being a vehicle for the articulation of weighty issues of national import, *lucha libre* also functions within the world of popular entertainment. In that world, a central contradiction within the practice itself informs all that goes on in the arena and underlies much of Levi's text: *lucha libre* is a staged performance, not a competitive sport. As Levi's own experience in training reveals, *luchadores* are athletes for whom training, practice, and discipline are integral. Yet, the outcomes of their matches are predetermined. Thus, they are actors as well. According to Levi, this "secret" is known, but unspoken among the combatants themselves and their fans. This inherent dichotomy in *lucha libre* allows Levi to explore Mexican professional wrestling's history, evolution, and accoutrement (namely masks and stage names) as well as to delve into the literature on staged, public performances as reflections of national cultural, political power, and social dynamics. The result is an analysis of *lucha libre* as spectacle that informs our understanding of like spectacles in the political arena. For example, the decades of PRI dominated elections whose outcomes, despite being predetermined, provided a veneer of legitimacy for the ruling party, bears an unsettling resemblance to the choreographed course of a *lucha libre* match.

Levi's discussion of these areas of contradiction in *lucha libre* and in Mexican life is interesting, insightful, and a foundation upon which further scholarship can build. A no less interesting, but perhaps slightly cumbersome portion of the text is the section in which Levi writes in detail about her training as a *luchadora* and the intricacy of the holds, falls, and choreography of *lucha libre*. While readers can admire her moxie and several photographs help to illustrate the text, some of the detail of the wrestling moves is inevitably lost in the translation from words on the page to the reader's mental image. Nonetheless, *The World of Lucha Libre* is an informative and entertaining read based on thorough and definitely innovative research methodology that contributes substantively to our

understanding of contemporary Mexican national identity. There is much that readers at all levels of familiarity with Mexico can take from this text and much that this text can contribute to discussions of cultural performance and national life beyond Mexico.