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**Wrestling Hierarchy: Performance of Race, Nation, and Body
Surrounding a Case Study of Rey Mysterio**

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by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmothers Geri and Sandra whose love and support outweigh anything I can give in return. Our conversations have always encouraged me to explore new experiences and learn. Without either of them, there would have been no avenue to pursue my academic interests and I am truly grateful.

I would also like to dedicate this thesis to Professor Fernando Orejuela. His knowledge, patience, and insight were instrumental in my growth as an academic while attending Indiana University. Through his mentorship during my participation in the McNair Scholars Program, I was able to establish discipline as a writer, recognize and implement different scopes for seeing the world, and gain the confidence necessary to attend graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin.

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Abstract

Wrestling Hierarchy: Performance of Race, Nation, and Body Surrounding a Case Study of Rey Mysterio

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Abstract: This project explores luchador Rey Mysterio's cultural figure and the way it is formed institutionally via ringside commentary and through the WWE's approach to its media market; through his dialogue and performance of body; as well as the myriad ways his performance is interpreted by U.S. fans and around the world. Through the content analysis of four primary WWE texts, this thesis works to better understand how tropes of geography, space, and body interact with underlying (and sometimes very overt) themes of race, U.S. racial hierarchy, ethnicity, and nation presented via the spectacular theater of WWE performance. Important over-arching questions that this project strives to explicate upon focus on how embodiment and racial difference are presented in the U.S. historically and how Mexican American diaspora are represented through U.S. professional wrestling.

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Introduction

The transnationalization of culture as well as industry brings with it profound possibilities for forging new alliances and identities. The same conditions also induce neoconservative consolidations of power. –Caren Kaplan¹

WWE AND U.S. POPULAR CULTURE

The WWE has gained a near monopoly of its year round “sports entertainment” theater since the 1980’s when owner and CEO Vince McMahon established relationships with cable networks in an effort to nationalize his product within the U.S. Often nicknamed “the machine” by its employees, fans, and critics; the WWE is by far the flagship in mediating professional wrestling to the world. It is a growing, global, multi-media corporation that airs television shows twice a week along with special events and pay-per-views once a month on the *USA Network* and *Syfy* respectively, as well as a reality show on *E!* and two additional online television shows on *huluplus*. The publicly traded company is involved in film, music, books, magazines, licensing, and direct product sales. In February 2014, the company went live with its developed *WWE Network* which is a 24/7 online streaming and on-demand video program made available through *wwe.com* and mobile device applications in the U.S. The *Network* is expected to be made available in the “United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Hong Kong and the Nordics by the end of 2014/early 2015.”² Within the last 15 years, it has

¹ Kaplan, Caran. 1996. “Postmodern Geographies: Feminist Politics of Location.” *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Print. p. 145.

² “WWE Network Frequently Asked Questions.” *wwe.com*. <<http://www.wwe.com/help>>. Accessed 4/1/2014. Web.

bought out nearly all competitors including Extreme Championship Wrestling and Ted Turner's World Championship Wrestling which has allowed for an expansion of their archived library made available through the *WWE Network*. "WWE programming is broadcast in more than 150 countries and 30 languages and reaches more than 650 million homes worldwide."³ With market shares tripling after the recent development of its own network, the WWE continues to grow as a marketable worldwide phenomenon and part of U.S. popular culture.

This success been perceived by journalists, scholars, and wrestling enthusiasts to be the product of a number of the promotion's marketing strategies. Media technologies via camera-work,⁴ an early adoption to television and later to cable television, closed-circuit television and pay-per-views, and eventually on-line programming⁵ have consistently placed the company on the up and coming patterns of viewership and aesthetic. Tapping into narrative content that serves its base audience (which began with the nationalist sentiments of white, male, underprivileged, blue collar workers of the U.S. and eventually went on to further emphasize growing class division and hatred toward wealthy elites⁶) have allowed the company to stay relevant to those who enjoy its ongoing theatrical performance. The WWE also possesses the ability to project the

³ "Company Overview." *wwe.com* <<http://corporate.wwe.com/company/overview.jsp>>. Accessed 3/19/2013. Web.

⁴ Mazer, Sharon. 1998. *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi. Print. p. 15.

⁵ Beekman, Scott M. 2006. *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America*. Westport, CN: Praeger. Print. Chapter 7.

⁶ Hedges, Chris. 2009. *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*. New York: Nation Books. Print. p. 7.

cartoonish spectacle of characters to appeal to ironists⁷ as well as young children. An integration of U.S. popular culture from other forms of media entertainment (the music industry, *MTV*, and the borrowing of pre-contest rituals from other U.S. sporting events⁸) have worked to strengthen its parallels with topics of U.S. popular culture. Tropes of “reality television” and the blurring of “fiction and fact” (wrestlers are frequently physically injured and often implement elements of their personal lives in their performance⁹) develop its programming as a familiar reflection of contemporary U.S. programming. In addition, an integration of the crowd as part of the performance (breaking early professional wrestling tradition by leaving the lights on to highlight the audience with their signs and costumes) has help to create a relationship between actors and spectators that is heavily reliant on an appeal for participatory performance.¹⁰ It is in this way that a number of WWE marketing strategies attribute to its immense success.

LUCHA LIBRE AND THE “LATIN EXPLOSION”

Lucha Libre wrestling or “free fighting” is a form of sports entertainment and performance that is characterized by elaborate masks, quick alternating locks and holds, and high flying acrobatics popular in Spanish speaking countries. Gaining immense popularity in Mexico in the 1930’s, its distinct characteristics can be both compared and

⁷ Beekman, Scott M. 2006. *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America*. Westport, CN: Praeger. Print. p. 124.

⁸ Ibid. p. 125.

⁹ Silvera, Ian. April 6th, 2014. “The Big Business Results Behind WWE's WrestleMania 30.” *International Business Times*. <<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/big-business-results-behind-wwes-wrestlemania-30-1443491>>. Accessed 4/6/2014. Web. See also Hedges Chapter 1.

¹⁰ Beekman, Scott M. 2006. *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America*. Westport, CN: Praeger. Print. p. 125.

contrasted with professional wrestling in the United States (which began garnering huge popularity at the same time). Today, a number of lucha libre wrestlers (or luchadores) perform for the WWE.

During the same time lucha libre became popular in the states, notably in wrestling promotions such as ECW and WCW during the mid-1990's and into the millennium, "corporate marketing forces understood Latina/os as categories of potential capital at the same time that a resurgence of nativist discourse and sweeping immigration reforms saw Latinos as a potential threat to national unity."¹¹ This period in U.S. culture and commerce has been coined as the "Latin Explosion" (or "Latin Invasion" as the U.S. pop music media frequently dubbed it), when representations of Latino/as were (are) conflicting, both praised and challenged.

Michelle Habell-Pallán and Mary Romero's *Latino/a Popular Culture* points to events that included popular headlines of the "Latino Boom" of the 2000 U.S. Census and corporate America "discovering" the potential of a Latina/o market, the growing popularity and exoticization of Latina/o performers such as Jennifer Lopez and Carlos Santana and their "cross-over" appeal, as well as issues concerning activism and anxiety over U.S. immigration policy and Mexico/U.S. border issues.¹² Concentrating on an image of Puerto Rican pop musician Ricky Martin shaking his rear end at the 2001 inauguration of President George W. Bush, Habell-Pallán and Romero question how the

¹¹ Paredez, Deborah. 2009. *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory*. 2009. Durham: Duke University Press. p. 145.

¹² Habell-Pallán, Michelle and Mary Romero. 2002. "Introduction." *Latino/a Popular Culture*. New York University Press. Print. p. 1-3

public symbolism “contradict and mask the nation’s current and historical record of treatment toward Latinos at home and abroad”¹³ and that image is layered with “histories of imperialism, racism, class domination, patriarchy, and heterosexism”¹⁴ while it also “speaks to new geopolitical and economic realities that implicate Latinos and Latin America.”¹⁵

Nearly a decade after what popular culture has frequently deemed as a “Latin Explosion” in culture and commerce, wwe.com has reported that its flagship program *Raw* is the most watched program on ad-supported cable among Hispanic viewers and the most watched entertainment program on cable among Hispanic men ages 18-34, 18-49, and 25-54 in the U.S.

REY MYSTERIO

Rey Mysterio (a stylized pseudonym meaning “King of Mystery”) is the character performed by Mexican American Oscar Gutierrez Rubio. One of the most popular and successful “baby face” stars (“good guys” or “técnicos”) in the WWE, he began his career in Mexico under the wing of his uncle (who held the persona of Rey Misterio, Sr.) before entering U.S. wrestling promotions in 1995 during a period where many U.S. fans were introduced to the luchador wrestling style for the first time during the pre-mentioned “Latin Explosion.” Born in Chula Vista, California (just south of San Diego), Mysterio hails from a specific regional space in close proximity to the Mexican/U.S.

¹³ Ibid. p. 1.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 3.

¹⁵ Ibid.

national border. His unique performance in the wrestling world often uses this space thematically to construct his persona while he has moved back and forth through promotions in Japan, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the U.S. As he has become the lightest World Champion in WWE history (5'6" 175 lbs) and obtained World titles on three separate occasions, Mysterio (along with other notable Mexican and Mexican American wrestlers Eddie Guerrero, Super Crazy, Psicosis and Juventud Guerrera) has helped transform and spearhead the lucha libre aesthetic into U.S. professional wrestling that is packaged and made available outside of the country.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, METHOD, AND SOURCES

This project desires to explore Rey Mysterio's cultural figure and the way it is formed institutionally via ringside commentary and through the WWE's approach to its market; through his dialogue and performance of body; as well as the myriad ways his performance is interpreted by fans and around the world. Specifically, I wish to:

RQ1: Interrogate themes of geography, space, and body surrounding Mysterio's performance.

RQ2: Explore the structural forces that frame WWE's narrative and influence racial and ethnic stereotypes in the U.S.

By doing so, I wish to ask:

RQ3: How do the spectacle and racial performance of Rey Mysterio and his supporting cast encode a separation of national territories and its connection with race and racial hierarchy?

An important secondary and over-arching question that this project strives to explicate upon:

RQ4: How embodiment and racial difference are presented in the U.S. historically and how Mexican American diaspora are represented through U.S. professional wrestling.

This analysis is a case study of Rey Mysterio divided into sections of ringside commentary/institutional control, Mysterio's performance within the WWE, and the interpretations of fans to argue that these sections serve as a locus in providing a better understanding(s) of his cultural figure. Dividing the analysis in this order also works functionally to present how the WWE enacts institutional constraints that work to represent Mysterio and Latino wrestlers in simplistic, one-dimensional ways in accordance to race, ethnicity, and nation; the way Mysterio negotiates within this system subversively and provides "gaps" that point out the instability of its hegemony; and finally how fans perceive, interpret, and appropriate these "gaps" of instability. Supplementary material is added in relation to other luchadores and U.S.-style professional wrestlers whom interact with Mysterio, an industry analysis through the conduit of the WWE, and fandom studies primarily focusing on sites of interaction between Mysterio enthusiasts online.

This assessment examines four primary sources for the content analysis of the first two chapters. The WWE's *619*, *The Biggest Little Man*, and *The Life of a Masked Man* DVDs were viewed in an effort to explore how tropes of geography, space, and body interact with underlying (and sometimes very overt) themes of race, racial hierarchy, ethnicity, and nation presented via the spectacle and performance of the WWE

superstar. These DVDs primarily showcase Mysterio through matches, interviews, and other “biographical” material. This was appropriate for narrowing the scope of the analysis through a summary of milestone events, as well as commentary from Rey Mysterio, in order to effectively engage the wrestler without sifting through hours and hours of tape from live events with other billed performers. In addition, the “biographical” book by Jeremy Roberts entitled *Rey Mysterio: Behind the Mask* was utilized in the same fashion.

A desire to interrogate this subject stems from nostalgic memories of engaging in WWE text and merchandise as a child. From early youth to my teenage years, I was a passionate fan for such “sports entertainment” (hosting pay-per-view events with classmates, attending arena events, and even participating as a performer in “backyard” productions). I have only within the past two years been engaged yet again to watch and even participate at live events- partially as a focus of academic inquiry, partially as an ironist who enjoys a number of the ridiculous and cartoonish spectacle that is produced through the WWE, and partially as both reminiscence for adolescence and the feeling of being a part of a community of peers who enjoy the performance as well.

However, the main focus and importance of this thesis is to point out the problematic features of U.S. professional wrestling and how different actors, whether audience members or performers, work within this theater utilizing and feeding into categorizations of monolithic cultural groups in ways that reflect imperialist and U.S. nationalist sentiment. In addition, I am interested in the ways actors operate, negotiate,

and reappropriate stereotypes and “common sense” ideology¹⁶ in a subversive manner that can recreate opposing meanings.

THEORY, TERMS, AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This project is invested in articulating understandings of Rey Mysterio’s cultural figure. I am defining cultural figure as the locus of language, representations, and symbolism utilized to create myriad meanings within multiple, overlapping cultural spheres, namely Latino cultures, U.S. popular culture, and professional wrestling/lucha libre cultures. In this specific study, I am engaging the tropes and themes from wrestling commentary and industrial studies, the “individual” performance of Rey Mysterio the wrestler, and fandom studies of wrestling enthusiasts to provide a comprehensive overview of the differing representations of the performer and their meanings. This project is heavily invested in how these differing representations contribute to the frequent thematic constructions of citizenship, nation, geography, borders, and body as they exist in multiple, overlapping cultural spheres.

This project will borrow from Habell-Pallán and Romero in parsing out the definitions of “Latino” and “popular culture”:

This anthology purposefully links two highly contentious and problematic terms- “Latino” and “popular culture”- in order to embrace the contradictions within each and argue against (1) the conception of Latinos as a monolithic cultural group sharing the same language, geographical space, and political struggles; (2) the conception that “popular culture” refers to “authentic culture of the people” existing independently from the capitalist production of consumerism; and (3) the

¹⁶ or the ability to perceive, understand, and judge people and things within parameters of a shared U.S hegemonic culture (catering to white, masculine, heterosexual supremacist hierarchy) without debate or consideration for context, “folklore of capitalism.”

conception that popular culture is only produced by mass media. The essays demonstrate the manifold ways audiences “make their own meanings with the texts of popular culture and resources.”¹⁷

In reference to the use of the term “Latina/o,” the bulk of this project is invested in articulating the problematic ways it is often used within U.S. popular culture (media or otherwise) to categorically place cultural groups that share the same language, geographical space and/or socio-political struggles into a constructed, unified, and static group. Notwithstanding, this project also recognizes “Latina/o” as empowering within marginalized ethnic groups that share common ancestry and cultural heritage in terms of cultural identity.

This paper will borrow from Andrew Ross’s definition of popular culture:

Popular culture, as it is described in this book, is understood within this socio-economic context; the term covers a vast range of technologically advanced cultural products, industrially produced for profit, and consumed and used for a variety of purposes by a broad range of audiences. But the status of popular culture- what is popular and what is not- is also an unstable political definition, variably fixed from moment to moment by intellectuals and tastemakers, and in this respect, is often seen as constituting, if not representing, a political identity for the “popular classes.”¹⁸

This project emphasizes popular culture’s connection with “common sense” and “American values- that are presented as unchanging, as outlasting all rivals and competitors in the field of lived experience”¹⁹ although it does not recognize all popular culture to be limited to this working definition. In this context, the WWE as an

¹⁷ Habell-Pallán, Michelle and Mary Romero. 2002. “Introduction.” *Latino/a Popular Culture*. New York University Press. Print. p. 3. Referenced Within Text: Barker, Chris. 2000. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. p. 47.

¹⁸ Ross, Andrew. 1989. “Introduction.” *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge. Print. p. 9.

¹⁹ Ibid.

entertainment media industry is influenced and influences U.S. popular culture; and this entertainment is interpreted in different ways by a disparate audience.

It is extremely important to emphasize that this thesis desires to carefully and conceptually divide critical race theory from performance of race. While critical race theory seeks to explore embodiment and “organizing” groups of people into constructed categories via white supremacy, performance of race explores the implications of performing racialized bodies. While subjects in this project such as the performance of borders and geography complicate differentiating the divide, it is important to remember that performance can be interpreted by different groups in a number of ways. For example, many of the ways that Mysterio performs race by utilizing potentially marketable cultural, geographic, and/or ethnic means can be read as exploitative and problematic to some as well as an empowering space for identity production to others. In this way, critical race theory and performance of race are in no way mutually exclusive, but performance and reception studies possess the ability to engage reception in complex ways in terms of context.

Imperialism is integrated into this study as a way of understanding Mysterio’s performance in terms of the unequal power distribution between the United States and Mexico, as well as the dominance of western thought in categorizing the people of the world. Scholarship by Anne McClintock has proven invaluable in articulating the U.S.-based WWE’s branding itself with global superiority. The frequency of the dominating monolithic masculine white body within the performance as well as the company’s

attempts to globalize its product are viewed through the scope of global conquest and traditional western categorizations of bodies within nationalized spaces.

Nationalism is explored as it relates to the fetishized spectacle of WWE performance- that is, the categorization of wrestlers representing nations in the theater to aid the melodrama of global bouts. In addition, Mysterio's specific performance and audience studies point to the contradictions of nationalistic policing of brown bodies in the U.S. and the politics of border control between Mexico and the U.S. Examples of "third space" are argued in this thesis that work to complicate and deconstruct specific nationalist white American "authenticity" while articulating Mexican American diaspora and carving out a space of identity for those who share ethnic identity in both nations.

Fernando Orejuela's work regarding the body as cultural artifact is implemented in this project to examine the ways Mysterio's body works as canvas to attach decorative cultural meanings of nation and ethnicity. In addition, the body as cultural artifact and performance object can be manipulated to reflect the quintessential tastes of its patrons and collective communities (in this case, the WWE and its fanbase). The changing of patrons and collective communities then signify how meanings of body and Mysterio's cultural figure are drastically altered in this transformation.

Henry Jenkins and Jonathon Gray's scholarship regarding convergence theory and "paratext" are implemented in this thesis respectively to draw out the ways fans "freeze" moments in WWE text to reappropriate their meanings. Shane Toepfer's notions of "play" are utilized to argue how members of the professional wrestling audience are positioned as both producers and consumers of the theater; and (in this way) influence

how identity of the performer is constructed vis-à-vis the subversion of narratives, at times using the performance to mobilize discussion involving socio-politics within the U.S. as well as within the WWE.

It is my hope to complicate the often simplified discourse regarding professional wrestling and its assumed role in U.S. media as cheap hyper-masculine soap opera for the blue collar underbelly of the United States. Congruently, this project works in exploring the structural forces that frame WWE's narrative and influence racial and ethnic stereotypes to better understand systems of power that function within popular media. I argue that themes of geography, space, and body surrounding Mysterio's performance and cultural figure offer nuanced ways of approaching structures of power in both the WWE and U.S. media, subversion and negotiation involved with particular performances of race, as well as the ability of audiences to create their own meanings from such text.

Chapter 1: U.S. Racial Hierarchy and Ringside Commentators'

Performance of Race and Nation

INTRODUCTION

Wrestling commentary is important to U.S. popular and political culture because the framing and presentation of kinetic performance possesses the ability to establish familiarity and trust among a populist group of voters. There is no better example of this circumstance within the U.S. than the 1998-2002 Reform Party Governor of Minnesota and former wrestler/commentator Jesse "The Body" Ventura. However, while most scholarship tends to focus on Ventura's role as an actor, a wrestler, a general affiliate of professional wrestling, and/or a mixture of these roles; rarely does scholarship explore the specificities of his revered role²⁰ as a commentator and the way it has help to shape his political career.²¹ Further, his racial slurs utilized as a villainous color commentator character are rarely an object of discussion among academics when discussing his political ambitions and achievements, perhaps disregarded and negated as a performative role in low brow entertainment that has little to no connection with what Jesse Ventura (the Governor) "really" believes.

²⁰ Bixenspan, David. September 4, 2013. "Top 10 Pro Wrestling Commentators in History." *bleacherreport.com*. <<http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1761532-top-10-pro-wrestling-commentators-in-history/page/7>>. Accessed 4/2/1014. Web.

²¹ Gray, Virginia and Wyman Spano. July 2000. "The Irresistible Force Meets the Immovable Object: Minnesota's Moralistic Political Culture Confronts Jesse Ventura." *Daedalus*. 129:3. MIT Press. Accessed 4/4/2014 via scoUT. Web.

Janack, James. July 2006. "The Rhetoric of "The Body:" Jesse Ventura and Bakhtin's Carnival." *Communication Studies*. 57:2. Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group. Accessed 4/4/2014 via scoUT. Web.

Thimsen, A. Freya. Spring 2010. "Populist Celebrity in the Election Campaigns of Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger." *The Velvet Light Trap*. 65. University of Texas Press. Accessed 4/4/2014 via scoUT. Web.

What makes Ventura's rhetoric as a political figure interesting is his staunch disapproval of racial profiling and stereotypes while his WWE character utilizes these tropes to entertain his audience within the realm of performance. Ventura has openly criticized the NFL on his *Off The Grid* political commentary show in regard to the widespread acceptance of the term "Redskins" for its Washington D.C. football team, labeling it a racist term and equating it to the "N-word."²² In addition, he has also argued against U.S. border patrol practices, articulating that his witnessing of demands for proof of citizenship in Arizona two hours from Mexican/U.S. border is blatant unconstitutional racial profiling.²³ Despite this, Ventura's much earlier performances as a commentator have thrived on his adoption of stereotypical tropes. David Shoemaker expands:

If the acts weren't always bald-facedly racist, their matches were often peppered with the patently offensive bad-guy shtick of legendary color commentator Jesse "The Body" Ventura. At various times Ventura reacted to a Junkyard Dog interview by saying JYD had "a mouth full of grits," called his rope-a-dope in-ring routine "a lot of shuckin' and jivin'." He commonly referred to fan favorite Santana as "Chico," dubbed his finishing move the "flying burrito" finisher, and, when Santana was getting pummeled at WrestleMania IV, Ventura said, "I betcha Chico wishes he was back selling tacos in Tijuana right now!" He similarly referred to black wrestler "Birdman" Koko B. Ware as "Buckwheat" until eventually Vince McMahon himself put a stop to it.²⁴

Jesse Ventura's statements as a figure in U.S. political and popular culture juxtaposed with his commentary as a WWE performer raise important and complex questions in regard to the relationship between critical race theory and the performance of

²² Ventura, Jesse. February, 2014. "OTG Extra: The Redskins Are Racist | Jesse Ventura Off The Grid - Ora TV." *YouTube*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_Mo16dwLUE>. Accessed 4/1/2014. Web.

²³ Hooohoorobin. December 10, 2010. "Jesse Ventura walks off3 Opie and Anthony(2009)." *YouTube*. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ci8ZissZfc0>>. Accessed 4/2/2014. Web.

²⁴ Shoemaker, David. 2013. *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling*. New York: Gotham Books. Print. p. 137.

race. Do sports leagues like the NFL fall outside of the realm of his particular performance? Do villainous improvisational performers within the WWE fall short of Ventura's criticism regarding stereotypes because they aid spectacular drama in a global theater, even to the point when CEO Vince McMahon finds reason for Ventura to cease? I argue that the politics of socio-political language within the performance of WWE is extremely relevant and important, especially when unequal distribution of power affords white monolithic masculinity as the performative archetype. This is problematic when representations of celebrities in performative roles become a basis for rising to political office. A. Freya Thimsen describes, "Audiences were clearly prepared to absorb and reproduce Ventura's newly chosen role as a politician. Many of them, after all, were accustomed to accepting the reality of his chosen personas in staged environments as having real value as representations."²⁵ Due to this acceptance of representations, this chapter desires to explore the racialized and stereotypical rhetoric of ringside commentators, focusing on connections to non-egalitarian distribution of power inside and outside of WWE performance.

OVERVIEW

This chapter will focus on a number of performances involving Rey Mysterio, presenting how commentators' performance of race, gender, and nation are, in turn, partially reflective of the structures that influence racial and ethnic stereotypes in the

²⁵ Thimsen, A. Freya. Spring 2010. "Populist Celebrity in the Election Campaigns of Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger." *The Velvet Light Trap*. 65. University of Texas Press. Accessed 4/4/2014 via scoUT. Web. p. 49.

U.S., racial hierarchy, and the separation of nations. In addition, the suspension of disbelief by audience members to cheer or heckle these performances acts as a blurring between performance of race and critical race theory as well as an indicator that, of course, the two are not mutually exclusive. Rey Mysterio's cultural figure operates inside of this U.S. cultural performance structure as a representation of the global underdog- a smaller, weaker, and exotic masculinity that is racially and nationally performed via spectacle through the mediated ringside commentary. Dubbed the "Ultimate Underdog" by many of commentators, he is often positioned in commentary and press as handicapped against the more powerful white wrestlers for his size even though he is also praised as a "babyface" ("técnico" or "good guy"). "The road to respect for Mysterio has been a long and bumpy one... At 5'3" and 140 pounds after a big dinner, Mysterio learned early that he had to give his all in each and every match to not only win, but survive. That meant sticking to his fast-paced, high-risk aerial attack... and remaining alert at all times, knowing full well that virtually any opponent could overpower him if he was lured into following that man's game plan."²⁶ Having trained and performed in both Mexico and the U.S., his unique performance offers the observer an interesting perspective from which to assess the structural forces that influence the codification of body and the "global dominance" narrative of WWE.

I argue that instances of colonial rhetoric from commentators in reference to the WWE's racialized performance of Mysterio's body are power strategies for the

²⁶ Murphy, Dan. 1999. "Out of Alignment: Rey Mysterio Jr. Must Fly Solo." *Wrestler Digest*, winter, p. 57-59 via Serrato, Phillip. Ed. Nicholas Sammond. 2005. "Not Quite Heroes: Race, Masculinity, and Latino Professional Wrestlers." *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Print. p. 245.

normalization and standardization of whiteness both within the performance of nationalized white anxieties that aid the construction of national borders (particularly in regard to Mexican “infiltration”), “pure blood” criteria, and rigid racial and ethnic classifications. I will begin discussing the differentiating tropes between U.S. professional wrestling and Mexican lucha libre before articulating the imperialist language utilized in WWE branding to identify the company’s influential structure that ringside commentary exists within. I will discuss McClintock’s theory involving the World Exhibition and the categorization of racialized bodies. I will then argue specific instances of WWE produced performance involving Rey Mysterio that revolve around commentators’ themes of exoticization of Latino bodies, Mexican “invasion” and dislocation within U.S. space, the frequency of “nationalized showdowns” as WWE spectacle, and display of Mysterio and lucha libre as ineffectual within the realm of U.S. professional wrestling.

Latino wrestlers have historically been used in U.S. promotions to springboard white wrestlers’ careers and display the dominance of the hard and defined white body. When compounded with the branding of “global superiority,” U.S. professional wrestling’s particular performance positions such heavyweight white bodies as the supreme archetype for global monolithic masculinity.

PERFORMATIVE DIFFERENCES

When analyzing the WWE through the case study of Rey Mysterio, it is important to understand the aesthetic differences and tropes that exist within U.S. professional

wrestling and Mexican lucha libre respectively. While the majority of lucha libre performance is extremely enamored with locality and the communal celebration of performance, the WWE markets itself as *the* global premier company and strive for expansion as such. In addition, super heavyweight white monolithic masculinity has traditionally served as the basis of power and accumulation of championship titles in U.S. professional wrestling while lucha libre aesthetically draws upon smaller builds for quick alternating locks and holds as well as hyper acrobatic high “flying” maneuvers off of turnbuckles.

These lucha libre acrobatics, high speed, and “high flying” moves signify distinct differences when compared with the “power maneuvers” of U.S. wrestling. As the latter is often utilized to display the spectacle of inhuman strength through slams, locks, and cartoonish bodily figures; lucha libre posits an aesthetic that is beneficial for smaller bodied wrestlers pragmatically when spinning around or over their opponents with the common use of *hurricaranas*, roll up pins, swinging arm drags, swinging *DDT*'s, and air action that utilizes the ropes as “spring boards.” Dialogue with the use of amplified microphones within arenas to excite the audience is more so utilized in U.S. wrestling when juxtaposed with the lucha libre unspoken symbolism of the mask. It is in this way that luchadores build their performance around a quasi-comic book hero persona that sometimes is accompanied with the donning of capes and the label of “super” in their titles. Masks also differentiate from the U.S. use of face paint popular in the 1980's, as

masked luchadores guard their identities in an effort to transform into entities and social critics.²⁷

MARKETING GLOBAL DOMINANCE AND THE WWE “UNIVERSE”

During the 1980’s, the oldest and most popular lucha libre promotion in Mexico, Empresa Mexicana de la Lucha Libre (EMLL) or Mexican Wrestling Enterprise, changed its name to Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre (CMLL) or World Wrestling Council. In addition, it renamed all of its ten premier titles to all include “world” in them. This was a rebranding effort after its U.S. affiliate NWA²⁸ failed to compete with the expanding WWE enterprise. It has since then garnered huge success partly due to its contracts with the Televisa channel and remains part of flagship Mexican lucha libre promotions along with the AAA. CMLL made a deal in November 2013 with Azteca America TV network after a several month hiatus in the states and continues to seek expansion toward a U.S. audience. I argue that this successful rebranding strategy of implementing themes of world supremacy among theatrical gladiators to both mirror and compete with the WWE is an example of the hegemonic standard the promotion has placed in the global marketplace for professional wrestling and the strong influence of U.S. cultural products via globalization.

The WWE has recently begun rebranding strategies that go beyond international rhetoric to include the “universe” (e.g.- wwe.com, “Official Site of the WWE Universe”).

²⁷ Levi, Heather. Ed. Nicholas Sammond. 2005. “The Mask of the Luchador: Wrestling, Politics, and Identity in Mexico.” *Steel Chair to the Head*. Print. p. 102-106.

²⁸ National Wrestling Alliance founded in 1948 that operates independently but also shares video footage for WWE merchandising.

The promotion's ability to center itself as the elite theater of world professional wrestling is evident in its near monopoly of the U.S. professional wrestling market, its ability to reach global audiences, its continual (nearly comedic with the implementation of "universe") rebranding that emphasizes superiority over the slightest competition, and how this branding has affected other nationally centered promotions in and outside the U.S. to adopt themes of international dominance.

While themes of global supremacy and mobility are compounded by the WWE's international and intranational touring, the CMLL based in Mexico City opens and owns arenas based around the country primarily utilized for lucha libre events. The CMLL Arena México in Mexico City is famously dubbed the "cathedral of lucha libre" and has been catering to its audience since September 21st, 1933 at the time named Arena Modelo. While Madison Square Garden in New York City is often celebrated as the flagship location for the *WrestleMania* pay-per-view, the WWE tours globally and emphasizes its mobility, rather than one or a number of local arenas. This is partly due to the business structure of lucha libre performances in the country of Mexico that is organized into *empresas*, or:

private enterprises minimally consisting of a promoter and a stable of wrestlers. An empresa might or might not own its own arena(s). A "promoter" may be the owner of an empresa, or an agent for individual wrestlers, or the owner of an arena. The stability of these entities depends upon their overlap.²⁹

²⁹ Levi, Heather. 2008. *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity*. Duke University Press. Print. p. 23-24.

This is juxtaposed with the publicly traded WWE which owns no arenas and garners much of its revenue from film, product licensing, and direct product sales.

The WWE (which has gradually gained a near monopoly of the “sports entertainment” theater since the 1980’s when McMahon established relationships with cable networks) has within the past 15 years bought out competitors WCW and ECW in an effort to make their archived libraries of past pay-per-views available on the recently realized *WWE Network*. The WWE is currently an integrated media company that provides its scripted theater for audiences year round in over 150 countries in 30 languages. It is estimated to reach more than 650 million “homes” worldwide.³⁰ In addition, *wwe.com* provides links to other WWE websites that cater for areas and language outside the U.S. including “Arabia*, China, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, India, Japan, Poland, Portugal, Russia, and Spain,”³¹ as well as offer times, locations, and broadcasters for their weekly televised material.

Despite this global marketing outside of the U.S., Linda McMahon (Co-Founder and Former CEO of WWE, perennial candidate for the Republican Party, and wife of current CEO Vince McMahon) states in an interview with APCO International that taking the WWE public in 1999 was not done in order reach out different markets:

The major advantage in taking any company public is having capital and having your own currency then to grow, and expand, and to invest. It was not in terms of adding reach or growing marketplace. That was not behind the reasoning to take it

³⁰ “Company Overview.” *wwe.com*. <http://corporate.wwe.com/company/overview.jsp>. Accessed 3/19/2013. Web.

³¹ “Get WWE in your local language.” *wwe.com*. <http://www.wwe.com/worldwide/worldwide-wwe-sites>. Accessed 3/19/2013. Web. *The official WWE website lists “Arabia” as a country.

public, but it was really to establish your own currency and to be in a financial area where WWE had not been before and it has worked out very well.³²

This outtake suggests that WWE was content with its catering to a base audience and had little to no intention of utilizing its newly realized public company to reach out to more diverse markets around the globe but rather to take advantage of the more readily available capital to invest in other ventures and grow with its current content and branding strategies. When considering the influence the WWE has on other international promotions such as the former EMLL, this strategy is functioning successfully.

THE WORLD EXHIBITION AND RACIALIZED BODIES

This marketing strategy that influences the performative scope of global over-seeing by the U.S. based WWE is comparable to Anne McClintock's scholarship concerning the 1851 World Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London's Hyde Park regarding western imperialism as commodity spectacle. The Exhibition provided paying spectators the ability to observe "the Industry of All Nations" via "industrial commodities, decorative merchandise, ornamental gardens, machinery, musical instruments, and industrial ore"³³ while establishing Great Britain's role as the world's industrial leader.³⁴ Organizing "all of the world's cultures" within the Crystal Palace, spectators were able to pay for narratives of global progress of history.

³² APCO Worldwide. July, 2013. "Linda McMahon discusses making WWE a global brand." *YouTube*. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3HemfaMCoY>>. Accessed 4/10/2014. Web.

³³ McClintock, Anne. 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. Routledge: London. Print. p.57.

³⁴ Kishlansky, Mark, Patrick Geary and Patricia O'Brien. 2008. *Civilization in the West*. 7th Edition. Vol. C. New York: Pearson Education, Inc.

“The dioramas and panoramas (popular, naturalistic replicas of scenes from empire and natural history) offered the illusion of marshaling all the globe’s cultures into a single, visual pedigree of world time... Time became global, a progressive accumulation of panoramas and scenes arranged, ordered and catalogued according to the logic of imperial capital. At the same time, it was clearly implicit, only the west had the technical skill and innovative spirit to render the historical pedigree of the Family of Man in such perfect, technical form.”³⁵

WWE spectators gather in stadiums and watch from televisions, computer screens, and cellular devices across the U.S. and other countries to experience the performance of these cultural narratives played out in a theatrical spectacle of struggling codified bodies, pyrotechnics, and Titantron entrance theme music being played out “under one roof.” Ringside commentators work with cameramen as a panoptical police to help dictate how these performances are interpreted by spectators outside of the stadium itself. Focusing primarily on television sets in their ringside commentators’ booths, they work to reinforce a visual regime that constructs cultural figures out of global gladiators fighting out the struggles of a world society. McClintock’s scholarship regarding the World Exhibition works as a candid example of how western imperialism seeks to control and categorize cultural criteria into organized nations for the purpose of commodity spectacle. Alsultany specifies the ways this imperialism is implemented upon bodies, placing great emphasis on the fact that signs of multiethnicity disrupt the white western policing of racialized bodies as nation. The panoptical nature of WWE ringside commentary and camera framework exhibit this disruption via the policing dialogue and

³⁵ McClintock, Anne. 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. Routledge: London. Print. p.57-58.

gaze of their performance, often placing Mysterio's body and cultural figure in a state of dislocation between nations. Furthermore, WWE commentary exhibits how strongly connected Mysterio's racialized body is with the projection of his cultural figure.

Relationships between post-colonial theory and nationalized racial hierarchy within the performance are abundant in the way Mysterio is discussed within mediated ringside commentary. Marta Savigliano discusses a "colonizing gaze" of western Europeans exoticizing and eroticizing Latina/o performance of Tango dance,³⁶ in the same way WWE and U.S. professional wrestling commentary establishes an "othering" of Mysterio's performance executed as a reassurance of the colonizer's identity (in this case, white western Eurocentricism). Engaging the regressive imperialism within these texts helps to better understand the systems of power within the performance. These systems reflect the popular notions of national borders and service the racial hierarchy that normalizes whiteness while exoticizing and eroticizing representations of the "other". Savigliano's work helps to understand how colonialism is inherently tied to racial hierarchy as well as providing a form of performance that similarly suggests how framework interprets the exoticized body.

Western imperial stages and screens are set up to pass judgment, to frame, and to present the exotic as such. These imperial bourgeois settings constitute the exotic. "Civilized" theaters... whether actually located in the West or in the Rest of the World, stage and project exoticism as the return of the colonially repressed.³⁷

³⁶ Savigliano, Marta E. 1995. *Tango And The Political Economy Of Passion (Institutional Structures of Feeling)*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. Print. p.73.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 81.

Understanding imperialism's desire to categorize races, nations, and ethnicities into simplistic hierarchies is imperative for understanding commentators' nationalized rhetoric involving Mexico/U.S. socio-political issues, which will be explored in the following sections.

EXOTICIZATION AND "OTHERING"

As the "*Latin Explosion* of culture and commerce"³⁸ in the mid-1990's clearly influenced the adoption of luchadores into the U.S. wrestling market, slippage of racialized aesthetic soon followed commentators adjusting to ways in which to discuss the "new" style. Mysterio was one such body in this discussion. His movements, "bronzed skin", and smallness of stature were gazed upon to reflect how white U.S. culture sought to distinguish and categorize bodies through performance at the same time that "sweeping immigration reforms saw Latinos as a potential threat to national unity."³⁹

As commentary at 1998's WCW⁴⁰ *Bash at the Beach* exhibits, the exoticized tone of commentators Bobby Heenan (a color commentator whose job is to often cheer on the "heels" or "bad guys") and Tony Schiavone (a play by play commentator who sometimes supports the "babyfaces" or "good" wrestlers but ultimately attempts to commentate in an unbiased manner) weave together rhetoric that codifies Mysterio's weight, skin tone, and

³⁸ Paredez, Deborah. 2009. *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory*. 2009. Durham: Duke University Press. p. 7. Also, see Introduction of this thesis for more comprehensive definition of "Latin Explosion."

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ WCW was a former U.S. based wrestling promotion that has since merged with WWE. WWE includes WCW matches and tapings in its products.

an aesthetic of lucha libre wrestling together in a matter of seconds, exemplifying the importance of connecting his style of performance with that of race and nation.

Bobby “The Brain” Heenan: Looks like he’s (Mysterio) in the best condition I’ve ever seen him in. Looks like he’s put on, about what do you say, maybe ten fifteen pounds.

Third Commentator: Easily it looks like doesn’t it?

Tony Schiavone: Great definition. He looks bronzed, tanned. He looks great. Rey Mysterio, Jr. and of course the trademark of Rey Mysterio, Jr., obviously, the high flying techniques.⁴¹

Although nearly all U.S. wrestlers’ bodies are policed by commentators in an exotic and homoerotic fashion, Schiavone’s dialogue cannot be read without considering race as Mysterio’s skin is naturally brown. Schiavone’s dialogue acts as an uneasy bridge between his fascination with the lucha libre style and Mysterio’s skin tone, which is implied as something the wrestler actively controls- like the upkeep of his body’s definition and weight. By establishing skin tone as controllable upkeep, this commentary can work to understand actual color of skin as a manipulated racial construct. In other words, since Mysterio is a “babyface” or “good guy”, perhaps he is lighter or whiter than the spectator might suspect from viewing him at this moment in time. It suggests that Mysterio intentionally tans or “bronzes” himself like other white wrestlers to appear more exotic and toned for his matches and audience. Being whiter than he appears hegemonically categorizes Mysterio within the standard default of performing wrestlers fighting for good.

At the 1998 WCW *Hog Wild* event in a bout featuring Mysterio against masked Japanese wrestler Último Dragón, Bobby Heenan exclaims, “Are they quick? Are they

⁴¹ WWE: *Rey Mysterio: 619*. 2003. WWE. Film.

fast? Are they good? Yes and they're also ugly or they wouldn't hide their face."⁴² Although color commentators traditionally "talk trash" about performers to conflict with the play-by-play commentator's "unbiased" interpretation of matches, this statement also establishes a relationship performative commentators create to connect the aesthetics of lucha libre with physical appearance and marginalized "foreignness." Nearly if not all of the performers who wore masks during this period in the WCW were luchadores. The masks serve as a symbol of their character's honor infused upon their body. Their mask *is* the face of the character and this is the reason that a performative unmasking of a luchador in Mexican promotions is considered a humiliating event. "A wrestler thus unmasked is disempowered. Until the mask is returned he or she can't fight, but can only clutch his or her face and wait- either for a partner to retrieve it or to be led to the dressing room to put on a fresh one."⁴³ Heenan's dialogue downplays the significance of the mask as honor and disrupts its ability to suspend disbelief, instead focusing on the "ugliness" of the luchadores' faces under the mask. This further marginalizes the bodies of luchadores away from the hegemonic standard of masculine attractiveness within the performance of U.S. professional wrestling (that is monolithic, white, defined, and heavyweight).

⁴² *WWE: Rey Mysterio: The Biggest Little Man*. 2007. WWE. Film.

⁴³ Levi, Heather. 2008. *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity*. Duke University Press. Print. p.115.

“INVASION” AND DISLOCATION

Marginalization is performed when luchadores are placed within a narrative of “Mexican infiltration” into the U.S. Just as popular music by Bronx born Jennifer Lopez was considered part of the “Latin invasion” of the U.S. market in the 90’s, San Diego born Mysterio becomes categorized as an infiltrator of U.S. professional wrestling during the same period. This is a candid example of how national rhetoric built from the anxieties of white U.S. power consolidation become woven into the language of professional wrestling performative commentary. During a July 25th, 2002 weekly WWE taping of *Smackdown*, play by play commentator Michael Cole exclaims, “He’s the most celebrated luchador to *invade* the U.S. since Mil Máscaras*” (emphasis mine).⁴⁴ Cole’s labeling of Mysterio’s cultural figure as an “invader” is intrinsically tied to the nationalized rhetoric that seeks to categorize race and bodies as representations of nation. U.S. born Mysterio is contradictorily invading the nation where he was born, resides, and is a citizen of- placing him at an intersection of dislocation. The concept of invasion helps to further construct national boundaries dictated by one’s assimilation to white U.S. cultural norms. In this particular case, Mysterio’s role as a luchador (a traditional form of wrestling popular in Mexico) serves as an infiltrating agent upon the U.S. professional wrestling aesthetic dominated by white masculinity and a potential threat to the nationalized unity that exists in this performance. Evelyn Alsultany expands on the nature of dislocation in her essay entitled “Los Intersticios: Recasting Moving Selves.”

⁴⁴ WWE: *Rey Mysterio: The Biggest Little Man*. 2007. WWE. Film. *Mil Máscaras is one of the “Big Three” of lucha libre, along with El Santo and Blue Demon.

Dislocation results from the narrow ways in which the body is read, the rigid frameworks imposed on the body in public space... An inability to conceptualize multiethnic persons reflects a colonial ideology of categorization and separation based on a “pure blood” criteria- a system constructed for the white colonists to maintain power. Rigid racial categories keeps us separate. Multiethnic identity comes as a surprise and a danger within this framework as people attempt to place us, to make sense within the schemas available for understanding people and the world. Our identities transgress the constructed categories and become threatening.⁴⁵

Dislocation, as Alstultany suggests, is the result of an inability to neatly categorize multiethnic individuals in white hegemonic U.S. society the same way the World Exhibition sought efficiently categorize “all of the cultures of the world” under one roof for Western policing. The colonial mindset that works to maintain power in the U.S. is also reflective in the WWE’s performance of ethnicity and nation, working to categorically place bodies within national boundaries. “Pure blood criteria” facilitates the global ordering of nations in wrestling spectacle in an attempt to establish one dimensional cultural gladiators fighting over stake in the WWE universe. Bodies are constructed as representations of national space.

In an ECW⁴⁶ taping of *Hardcore TV* on September 26th, 1995, Mysterio (just beginning his wrestling career in the U.S.) is paired against luchador Psicosis (who hails from Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico). Both competitors are introduced in grand nationalized fashion, with Mysterio being introduced from Mexico City in order to

⁴⁵ Alstultany, Evelyn. 2002. “Los Intersticios: Recasting Moving Selves.” *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions For Transformation*. Ed. Anzaldúa, Gloria E. and Analouise Keating. Routledge: New York. Print. p. 108-110.

⁴⁶ Extreme Championship Wrestling which has since merged with the WWE. Its videos and products are now WWE merchandise.

sensationalize the nationalized match. As Mysterio enters the arena, commentator Joey Styles exclaims:

Rey Mysterio, Jr., 20 year old superstar of lucha libre and contrary to what Bobby Heenan would have you believe, that's not an item you can take out at Taco Bell. It's Mexican professional wrestling and if you are not familiar with it, you are in for a special treat tonight on Extreme Championship Wrestling.⁴⁷

The reference to Bobby Heenan in this segment recalls an earlier WWE commentary dialogue in which Heenan labeled Mexican American wrestler Tito Santana a "head chef at Taco Bell." Conversely, Styles attempts to establish a framework that is a showdown of Mexico nationalism, exotic and separate from U.S. popular culture. Taco Bell is utilized by both Heenan and Styles as something that is not quite authentic, a symbol of multi-cultural dislocation of Mexican Americans that disrupts the performance's ability to promote a national battle within the hegemonic categorization of ethnicities. What is most intriguing and almost laughable about this particular ECW segment is that while the ring announcer is billing Psicosis from Tijuana, Mysterio seems to think he is being introduced and billed from the same location; jumping from the ropes to energize the crowd.

NATIONALIZED SHOWDOWNS

This inability, or performative refusal, to conceptualize the multiethnic identity of Mysterio becomes more candid when ringside commentator Matt Striker and suggestive camera framing work together in an attempt to utilize an odd mixture of nationalism and categorization in a bout between Mysterio and Mexican wrestler Alberto Del Rio on an

⁴⁷ WWE: Rey Mysterio: *The Biggest Little Man*. 2007. WWE. Film.

October 8th, 2010 taping of *Smackdown*. At this time, Mysterio's use of the 619 San Diego area code is extremely thematic in his performance. Due to this, the nationalized spectacle that Striker attempts to create becomes fragmented and confusing. Mysterio's use of bordered U.S. space to represent his body and performance clash with the hegemonic narrative of a nationalized showdown. Striker states in "pure blood" criteria fashion:

If anyone can overcome the odds it's Rey Mysterio. Rey rehabbed in Mexico. In Tijuana, the children ran out and pleaded with Rey Mysterio, 'Please tell the world that Alberto Del Rio does not represent the Mexican people. You do, Rey Mysterio... pride can drive men to do very interesting things but that's what Rey thrives on right there. The young members of the WWE universe really give Rey Mysterio the motivation, but this is about nationalistic pride.⁴⁸

As Striker commentates, Mysterio is seen performing his habitual ring entrance while giving a child one of his shirts in the audience, his 619 infused theme music thumping loudly. As soon as Striker utters "nationalistic pride", the camera switches its gaze upon Del Rio with the American flag draped in the distance of the stadium, a convenient way to show who exactly dictates the authenticity of these national battles. I argue that this particular shot of the flag works to emphasize the United States as the supreme organizer of national authenticity as well as provide a dramatic back drop for U.S. audiences during a dialogue that works to push nationalized spectacle. Striker continues during the course of the match, "This is about nationalistic pride. This is about who belongs and who should go... or is it time for the torch to be passed? Is Alberto Del Rio perhaps the new, improved Rey Mysterio or the first ever Alberto Del Rio on Friday

⁴⁸ *WWE: Rey Mysterio: The Life of a Masked Man*. 2011. WWE. Film.

night *Smackdown*?” After Mysterio claims victory over an undefeated Del Rio, another commentator concludes the segment, stating “Rey Mysterio showing the entire WWE universe who the real icon is with three numbers Del Rio will never forget: 6-1-9.”⁴⁹

This match candidly demonstrates the spectacular use of performance to display nationalized bodies to a U.S. professional wrestling audience. The construction of the “WWE universe” then serves as a scope to judge claims of national authenticity as well as connecting iconized bodies to the performers (i.e.- cultural figures). Though the performers practice completely different styles (Mysterio performs *lucha libre* aesthetic while Del Rio utilizes “Greco-Roman”), Del Rio is considered to replace Rey Mysterio as it may be time for the “torch to be passed” to a “new, improved” Mexican. Other rhetoric such as “who belongs and who should go” eerily reflect linguistic white anxieties of contemporary U.S. migration policy and Latina/o reproduction in the United States. Children are used as psychological leverage to imagine a more progressive future world or “WWE universe.” The “righteous” Mexican American luchador Rey Mysterio is then the icon of Mexico, constructed as a cultural figure for the country by defeating the Mexico native Del Rio heel, whose character breaks rules to win his matches and represents class elitism. Of course, this one dimensional placement of Mysterio as *the* Mexican body becomes increasingly complex when his 619 themes disrupt the colonial framework by suggesting multiethnic or multinational representation.

Outside of WWE performance, this use of “pure blood criteria” to conjure notions of authenticity has led to similarly strange ways of discussing international sporting

⁴⁹ Ibid.

events. Elena Tajima Creef discusses similar discourse in U.S. media regarding the “international showdown” between Japanese American Kristi Yamuguchi and Japan’s Midori Ito in the figure skating category of the 1992 Olympics.⁵⁰ During an age of anti-Asian xenophobia, nearly all U.S. media attention concerning Yamuguchi “straddled the tensions of around race, culture, and national identity” and worked to draw out how “assimilated” the skater was into clichéd American culture as a “cheerleader, prom goer, sister of the all-star basketball player, and exclusive dater of white men.” The anxieties of Euro-American hegemony were abundant in the post WWII threat of Japanese superiority. This, in turn, made way for media narratives that over-emphasized Yamuguchi’s “all-Americaness” while exoticizing her body. An article from Newsweek exemplifies:

In a sport where no woman but of white, Northern European birth or heritage has ever won the figs, the battle for the gold and all the lucre it earns sets up a duel between two young women named Yamaguchi and Ito, whose *bloodlines* both stretch back, pure and simple, to the same *soft, cherry-blossom* days on the one bold *little* island of Honshu. The twist is, though, that if the *powerful* Ito is Midori, of Nagoya, the *delicate* Yamaguchi is Kristi, from the Bay Area, *fourth-generation American*. It’s the *chrysanthemum* and the *sword*- on the ice together, *world’s apart*.⁵¹

The “pure blood criteria” (quite blatantly, i.e.- *bloodlines*) characterizes white colonial power’s fascination with rigid racial categories while simultaneously laying claim to Yamuguchi’s exoticized, *delicate* body as assimilated American. “And somehow caught in the middle, Yamuguchi- either American or Japanese- remains suspended in

⁵⁰ Creef, Elena Tajima. 2004. *Imaging Japanese America: The Visual Construction of Citizenship, Nation, and the Body*. New York University Press. Print. p.153-171.

⁵¹ Emphasis Creef’s, Deford, Frank. “The Jewel of the Winter Games.” *Newsweek*. February 10, 1992. p. 53.

limbo in this impossible and contradictory subject position.”⁵² This same relationship of dislocation occurs when Mysterio’s performative cultural figure and body become iconography for a hyper nationalized Mexico, yet also representative of his San Diego area code. In an odd exercise of deciding which racially marked bodies represent which nations at which times (sometimes simultaneously and overemphasized in “international showdowns”), the categorization is always dictated by that of a policing white hegemony. Both instances offer different ways in which allegiance toward loyal “all-American” U.S. superiority authenticates the way in which their bodies are read and perform. This ideology constructs the U.S. as the western determiner of national body placement and the sensational spectacle of the “international showdown” is quite telling of how the WWE utilizes these nationalized bodies to project superiority to its audience.

Creef’s example of nationalized sports performance and ethnic dislocation is highly comparable to WWE narrative rhetoric. The scholarship provides a lens from which the policing and placing of racialized bodies in and out of national categories works congruently with WWE’s initiative to implement Mysterio’s cultural figure as a global gladiator who is placed in often contradictory positions of nationality. In all circumstances, however, WWE commentary performance is presented as the over-seeing panoptical determiner of which bodies represent which nations in an effort to upkeep branding as the global elite of professional wrestling.

⁵²Creef, Elena Tajima. 2004. *Imaging Japanese America: The Visual Construction of Citizenship, Nation, and the Body*. New York University Press. Print. p. 154.

INEFFECTUALNESS OF MYSTERIO AND LUCHA LIBRE

Further policing of bodies by U.S. professional wrestling commentary exhibits ways in which performers seek to codify Mysterio's smallness of stature with that of his nationalized body. His body's inability to occupy as much physical space as larger, white wrestlers is used to performatively emasculate and patronize his cultural figure. Since Mysterio's body is often read as a representation of the country of Mexico, these comments work to also emasculate and patronize the nation in ways that present it as inadequate and less than a separate U.S. display of power. Serrato discusses the limited meanings that are assigned to Latino bodies in U.S. professional wrestling, pointing to ways that monolithic whiteness both places emphasis on size and power while simultaneously performing inferior Latino masculinity. In comprehensive scholarship examining Latino wrestlers from the 1950s-2000s, Serrato argues that Latino qualities in the latter decades exhibit ineffectuality, "signs of cowardice, weakness, and a ghetto-style animality in the face of fearsome, white power."⁵³ In this way, Latino bodies were utilized as vehicles for the establishment of white supremacy within the performance. Although Mysterio operates as a babyface actor in WWE theater, color commentators and heels show how disturbingly relevant their racist and nationalized comments are when audience members laugh/applause; as well as when these comments appear on websites that promote the "greatest quotes" of said performers.

⁵³Serrato, Phillip. Ed. Nicholas Sammond. 2005. "Not Quite Heroes: Race, Masculinity, and Latino Professional Wrestlers." *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Print. p. 235.

Heenan once again displays his partiality for Mexican American Taco Bell jokes in a July 7th, 1998 episode of WCW *Thunder*.⁵⁴ While Mysterio is on a hiatus from the promotion involving a supposed leg injury, wrestler Chris Jericho takes to the ring with a “big surprise” for his fans that will involve a match between himself and Mysterio on that very night. When it is time for Mysterio to make his way to the ring, a small person or *mini estrella* walks to the squared circle instead with a Mysterio mask on. Jericho sarcastically banter, “He’s in the best shape of his life, I’m actually a little bit nervous about facing this man tonight. Look at the size of him, ladies and gents. This man revolutionized our sport. He overcame all the odds.” As Jericho begins to dominate the match Heenan exclaims, “I know who that is. Isn’t it the little chihuahua on the Taco Bell commercials?”

In an obvious attempt to patronize Mysterio’s height and success within the performance of U.S. professional wrestling, the comments of this event also work to label luchadores, the smaller wrestlers within the promotion at this time, as ineffectual and insuperior when gauged against the power of white monolithic masculinity. The use of a mini estrella performer is clearly tied to the traditional weight bracket of such wrestlers in Mexican lucha libre. However, by allowing the performer to dress as Mysterio, all luchador wrestlers become categorically linked to this smaller stature. The powerful dominance that Jericho displays over the estrella body is then codified as a superior white heavyweight body conquering the ineffectuality of the luchador aesthetic. Heenan

⁵⁴ wcvarchive. “7-2-98 WCW Thunder - Chris Jericho vs Fake Rey Mysterio.” *YouTube*. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lj8FKublHV0>>. Accessed 12/28/2013. Web.

summarizes the racialized and nationalized spectacle with an off color one liner that is intended to place smaller luchadors in a box of ineffectual animalized Mexican commodities. The estrella and lucha libre as a whole become a cartoonish commercial dog that exists for the sole purpose of marketing an inauthentic and digestible Mexican commodity to a U.S. market.

This kind of rhetoric becomes blatantly sensationalized when it is part of the interaction between wrestlers in skits performed backstage with panoptical, surveillance like cameras documenting narrative outside of match performance. The WWE's *619* DVD is filled with separate snippets of U.S. wrestler Kurt Angle in character and performing verbal attacks on Mysterio's physical size. "I just got beat by a 12 year old. What the heck is going on around here?" "Sorry son, you must be this tall (gestures hand) to talk to Kurt Angle." The montage concludes with a response to a challenge by Mysterio in 2002: "There's one thing I can't stand. It's a little man with an attitude. You want a piece of me at SummerSlam? *La freakin' Cucaracha*, you're on, pal!"

What distinguishes Mysterio's conflicts with Angle from past WWE performances leading up to the late 90's is the fact that Angle is positioned as the quintessential American but marked as a heel, a precursor to how the portrayal of "all-Americaness" is beginning to evolve in WWE narratives. While Angle is a real life U.S. Olympic gold wrestling champion and wears an American flag singlet to the ring, he is also booed with chants of "you suck" in response from with the horns of his entrance music. Despite this new turn away from the overtly one dimensional cheering for U.S. American themed wrestlers in past WWE performances, racist sentiments are still largely

entertaining to the audience. The viewer is able to hear a laughing response after Angle's comments and assume that such sentiments are embraced as agreeable and comical performance by audience members. The use of "La Cucaracha" is intrinsically tied to ethnic and national assault as it is a traditional Spanish folk corrido that became popular in Mexico during the Mexican Revolution. Notwithstanding, La Cucaracha has an interesting history in American professional wrestling among areas that cater to Latina/o audiences. During WWE Hall of Famer "Rowdy" Roddy Piper's stint in the NWA, the white Canadian wrestler continually insulted the Mexican American community of Los Angeles as a heel in the late 70's. At one point apologizing to the audience for his behavior, he offered to play the Mexican national anthem on his bagpipes to make amends but instead played La Cucaracha to further antagonize fans. In this way, the corrido is appropriated and utilized to enforce nationalized spectacle as well as place Mexican and Mexican Americans, even audience members, in inferior spaces narratively. Angle's utilization of the corrido immediately following his attack on Mysterio's height suggests intersections between Mysterio's stature, ineffectuality, and Mexican American ethnicity. Mysterio's lack of response to the emasculation, like so many other obedient and complacent babyface Latino wrestlers that Serrato documents as "ethnically neutral", constructs a performance that codifies his body as inferior to a white monolithic power hierarchy in the WWE.

In the 1980s and 1990s, profit-minded promoters sacrificed the prominence and respectability of Latino performers such as Tito Santana, Rey Mysterio Jr., and Eddie Guerrero, while they made large and powerful white wrestlers their star attractions. As part of an effort to bolster the primacy of their white stars, promoters oversaw the development of storylines and characterizations that

positioned Latino wrestlers as weaker and smaller, embodying a masculinity that was inferior to the monolithic masculinity that larger white wrestlers embodied.⁵⁵

Serrato's work points to specific examples of Latino emasculation within the identified structure of McClintock, Asultanty, and Creef that produce a narrative that glorifies white monolithic masculinity as the essential display of performative bodies and power. Keying in on ineffectualness and animalization, he carves out at a framework to consider how WWE commentators seek to display Mysterio and lucha libre. Since both Mysterio and lucha libre are sensationally nationalized and categorized within WWE narrative, it highly suggests the same characteristics represent that of the country of Mexico and Latino bodies as a whole. This brings about the questioning of the specificities of national boundaries and space upon the body.

CONCLUSION

Chapter 1 has discussed ringside commentary as an example of the WWE's performative institutional control of racialized bodies. I argue that these institutional constraints utilize different actors and fetishized spectacle to feed into categorizations of monolithic cultural groups in ways that reflect imperialist and U.S. nationalist sentiment and the normalization of white citizenship.

In Chapter 2, I interrogate the themes of geography, space, and body within Rey Mysterio's narrative and kinetic performance. Specifically, I examine what elements of

⁵⁵ Serrato, Phillip. Ed. Nicholas Sammond. 2005. "Not Quite Heroes: Race, Masculinity, and Latino Professional Wrestlers." *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Print. p. 235.

spectacle and racial performance by Rey Mysterio operate (within the WWE structure and commentary I have laid out in Chapter 1) to encode a separation of national territories and its connections with race and racial hierarchy. I emphasize ways in which Mysterio as a performer uses these themes to empower his cultural figure through the use of performative duality, which in turn fragments and threatens commentators' binary approach to his classification. I argue that Mysterio's self-narrative performance via dialogue, kinetics, and costume provides a "third space" that destabilizes hegemonic constructions of body and nation in the U.S. As a locus of ringside commentary, performative narrative of Mysterio himself, and fandom; I seek out how these plurality of perspectives join to form Rey Mysterio's cultural figure.

Chapter 2: Self-Narration and/of Body- La Máscara and “619” Contact Zone

We have inherited lives of separation, histories of fragmentation. Inherited the hearts of our fathers, haunted and scared. Exile is also a search for emotional reconciliation, even if it means a geographic and cultural distance. Go mi'ja, go.
–Susan M. Guerra⁵⁶

INTRODUCTION

This chapter desires to explore the ways in which Rey Mysterio presents and performs his body through dialogue, body art, kinetics, spectacle, costume, and mask within the pre-mentioned structural forces that frame the WWE's narratives. I will interrogate how these collective performances encode a separation of national territories and its connections with race and racial hierarchy within the temporal quality of the WWE while also pointing out how they allow for a blurring of national territories and a promotion of multiethnicism. In this way, Mysterio's self-narration operates in a dislocated space of contradiction within the U.S. professional wrestling narrative that has the ability to encode multiple and, at times, subversive meanings in terms of how embodiment is presented in the U.S. historically. These meanings can be dependent on a number of factors including intent, mediated commentary, U.S. popular culture, and reception of fans with differing ethnic backgrounds and knowledge of lucha libre aesthetics that contribute to the locus of his cultural figure. As Chapter 1 has shown how

⁵⁶ Guerra, Susan M. 2002. Ed. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating. “In The End (Al Fin) We Are All Chicanas (Somos Todos Chicanas): Pivotal Positions for Change- A Textual Collage of Cross Cultural Exile Stories.” *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions For Transformation*. Routledge: New York. Print. p. 186.

ringside commentary, in multiple circumstances, builds upon and works congruent with the categorization of nationalized bodies and ethnicities; I will explore and argue how Mysterio's performance also subverts this commentary and categorization. I argue that thematic tropes in his performance work to emphasize the instability of U.S. hegemonic constructions of race as well as provide space for people to question this instability. This chapter examines how themes of geography, space, and body are present in his self-narration.

In Fernando Orejuela's dissertation entitled "The Body as Cultural Artifact: Performing the Body in Bodybuilding Culture," the author highlights how portraits of the human body are often manipulated to reflect the quintessential tastes of their patrons:

Symbolic significance is prioritized over its (the body's) physical essence and is largely accomplished through stylization. From the flesh, a tension arises between materiality and the human desire for abstraction. The body-made-artifact functions as an external signifier for which in the collective conscious of the community there is a corresponding signification that may be in opposition to the collective consciousness of society at large. Therefore, in portraiture, "Symbolic transfiguration" may demonstrate the sitter's (often patron's) prowess, either in terms of economy or sexuality, and therefore, not strategy but the portrait artist's idolatry of his/her subject.⁵⁷

Through the scope of body as cultural artifact, we can examine Mysterio's performative body and how it is decorated as artwork, an abstraction of the material world that operates within a performance that blurs lines between popular conceptions of sport and theater (similar to the way that Orejuela articulates competitive bodybuilding as a blurring between sport and abstract art). Mysterio's body then acts as a canvas or a

⁵⁷ Orejuela, Fernando. 2005. *The Body as Cultural Artifact: Performing the Body in Bodybuilding Culture*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Retrieved 11/15/2013. Web. p. 128.

block of wood to be manipulated or perfected with the cultural meaning(s) of a collective community, which often emphasize the patron's tastes. Applying this model to Mysterio's cultural figure offers a better understanding of the cultural contradictions that occur when patrons and collective communities are changed. Mysterio's bodily "canvas" has been mobilized from the former patronage (or paid performance if you will) of promoters in the Mexican based AAA to the U.S. based WWE; as well as from the collective community of Mexican lucha libre performance and spectatorship to that of U.S. professional wrestling. In turn, the cultural meanings and signification of Mysterio's decorated body become altered. La máscara, or the mask, as performance object exemplifies this transformation due to ways it is perceived and utilized in the separate theatrical promotions of predominately lucha libre and U.S. professional wrestling. Self-narration occurs when Mysterio highlights and discusses the importance of generational transfer within lucha libre as well as displeasure for the treatment of lucha libre tradition within U.S. wrestling promotions through his performance in WWE. It is for this reason that I chose Mysterio's WWE-produced "biographical" DVDs and book as sources for this self-narration. Milestone matches and interviews display Mysterio's self-narration through his character performance and allow for space to improvise and reflect upon the theatrical institutions that he has previously and is currently engaged in although any kind of critique for his current promotion, the WWE, is limited. I argue that these self-narrative performances, existing in theatrical institutions, at times reflect a subversive stance toward U.S. hegemonic constructions of national boundaries and strict categorizations of bodies and ethnicities within them.

LA MÁSCARA

Levi states that many people inside and outside the “familia luchástica” have drawn connections between lucha libre and the national culture of Mexico through the medium of the mask, specifically connecting the lucha libre mask with the ritual use of masks by the indigenous people of Mexico.⁵⁸ The author highlights the revolution of 1910-20 which shifted thinking via a post-revolutionary nationalist project, in which:

(the) paradigmatic Mexican came to be imagined as mestizo, rather than creole—the product of racial and cultural mixture between Spanish and Indian... The indigenous thus became identified as the locus of *Mexico profundo*, the ground of Mexico’s irreducible cultural identity. Yet the indigenous was not identified as the Mexican national subject per se.⁵⁹

In a non-WWE PBS documentary entitled *Tales of Masked Men*, a lucha libre enthusiast cites the performance spectacle to be a generational ritual that captures the “essence as Mexicans from Aztecs.”⁶⁰ Origins of the mask utilization in Mexican wrestling are disputed. Lucha libre archivist Christian Cymet states that the first *enmascarado* or masked wrestler from Mexico (appropriately named “El Enmascarado”) appeared months before what Heather Levi believes was the mask’s debut via a North American by the name of Cyclone Mackay aka “The Masked Marvel.” Levi states that the connection between Mexico’s traditional masked performances and lucha libre is “indirect at best,” bringing to light Mackay and the influence of North American comic

⁵⁸ Levi, Heather. 2008. *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity*. Duke University Press. Print. p.105.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p.106.

⁶⁰ *Tales of Masked Men*. 2012. Carlos Ávila and Thomas Calderon. Echo Park Films, Inc., Latino Public Broadcasting, and ITVS. PBS. Film. Viewed at the Mexic Arte Museum in Austin, Texas April 24, 2013. Translated from Spanish.

book heroes on Mexican popular culture. WWE television producer and writer Dan Madigan cites similar assumptions he had when first engaging lucha libre as well.

I assumed, like many lucha fans, that the concept of masked wrestling must have naturally come from Mexico's rich past. The pre-Hispanic indigenous peoples of Mexico- Aztecs, Incas, Mayans, indeed all the indigenous peoples of South and Central America- used masks that depicted demons and heroes. The masked character would symbolize the spirit of the jungle or the personification of an enemy or invader. A performer wearing the mask of a ferocious beast- a snarling jaguar or leopard- became infused with those qualities... But the concept of the masked wrestler began as a North American gimmick.⁶¹

Despite this, enthusiasts and folk specialists tend to explore la máscara de lucha libre in context with traditional Mexican ritualistic parallels of transformation. In other words, scholars and fans alike continually mention that the use of la máscara de lucha libre is similar to how ritualistic masks were utilized to transform performers into entities, animals, or invaders. World renown lucha libre photographer Lourdes Grobet states, "If we look at an element like the mask, we see that the mask exists in all Mexican rituals since time immemorial. That is the strength of Mexican lucha libre. That it is strongly tied to pre-Hispanic culture."⁶² In the same PBS documentary luchador El Hijo de Solar continues, "It's something that identifies us as Mexicans. We seek it out to feel our roots close by."⁶³ Levi explains that parallels between ritualistic dances frequent in indigenous Mexico with that of the luchador manifest themselves in the concept that "the mask allows the masker a moral authority... freeing him or her to take on or embody the role of

⁶¹ Madigan, Dan. 2007. *Mundo Lucha A Go-Go: The Bizarre and Honorable World of Wild Mexican Wrestling*. Print. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc. p. 46.

⁶² *Tales of Masked Men*. 2012. Carlos Ávila and Thomas Calderon. Echo Park Films, Inc., Latino Public Broadcasting, and ITVS. PBS. Film. Viewed at the Mexic Arte Museum in Austin, Texas April 24, 2013. Translated from Spanish.

⁶³ *Ibid*. Translated from Spanish.

the social critic.”⁶⁴ Both possess the ability to allow participants to “mock powerful figures and/or violate community norms, and those in which participants engage in ritual combat (or both).”⁶⁵ In this way, both performances of ritualistic dance and lucha libre allow performers to play out nationally significant themes, sometimes historical representations of the negotiation of indigenous and colonial cultures. While some of these traditional dances were utilized to spread Catholicism to indigenous groups during the late 1400’s, others like *Dance of the Marquis* (See Illustration 1) were performed to retell the colonialization of the country and the fall of Tenochtitlan.



Illustration 1: Exaggerated European Hernan Cortes masks at the Mexic-Arte Museum
for *Dance of the Marquis*.

This traditional and performative social commentary with masks is recognizable in earlier narratives of the lucha libre tradition in Mexico and continues to this day. Luchadores such as Ecologista Universal and Superbarrio took on national social issues

⁶⁴ Levi, Heather. Ed. Nicholas Sammond. 2005. “The Mask of the Luchador: Wrestling, Politics, and Identity in Mexico.” *Steel Chair to the Head*. Print. p. 98,102,105.

⁶⁵ Levi, Heather. 2008. *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity*. Duke University Press. Print p. 108.

in the 1980's, the latter even running for president of Mexico. "Mujer Maravilla, SuperAnimal, SuperGay, and Superniño all emerged in the 1990's to fight, respectively, for the rights of women, animals, gays, and street children."⁶⁶ Prior to the luchador political theater in the later part of the century, one of the most celebrated folk icons of Mexican popular culture, El Santo, served as a multi-media star appearing in comic books and four to five movies per year through the 1960's and 70's. His popularity stemmed from his appearances in the ring where he acted as symbol for the working class, rooted in the conflicts of urban areas while never removing his mask (even on movie sets) during this period.⁶⁷

After passing in 1984, El Santo's legacy and silver mask were transferred down to his youngest son, El Hijo del Santo, a common practice in lucha libre. This generational transfer of persona and symbol have become an important aspect of iconic Mexican performers and a way to thwart mortality and time by allowing personas or stage gimmicks to be continually resurrected theatrically. It is in this way that Mysterio was required to earn his uncle's approval before being allowed to carry the name and mask of Rey Mysterio, Jr. (dropping the Jr. upon entering the WWE). "It was a huge surprise. My uncle brought out a mask he had designed for me. He took off the Hummingbird mask (previous persona) and slipped on the new one- keeping my face hidden, of course. It was

⁶⁶ Levi, Heather. Ed. Nicholas Sammond. 2005. "The Mask of the Luchador: Wrestling, Politics, and Identity in Mexico." *Steel Chair to the Head*. Print. p. 120-121.

⁶⁷ *Tales of Masked Men*. 2012. Carlos Ávila and Thomas Calderon. Echo Park Films, Inc., Latino Public Broadcasting, and ITVS. Film. Viewed at the Mexic Arte Museum in Austin, Texas April 24, 2013.

a very emotional moment for me. Tears came down my eyes.”⁶⁸ In this dramatic account documented in Mysterio’s WWE biography, we are able to understand, at least performatively, the importance of traditional generational transfer of the mask between performers. Mysterio had to earn the right to carry on his uncle’s name before he was allowed carry both the title and mask. After competing in the AAA promotion and performing in international exhibitions that traveled around the Los Angeles area, Mysterio would eventually climb his way up U.S. promotions and sign to the WCW, the only company competing with WWE in the mid to late 1990’s.

Mysterio would go on to constantly alter and change his mask, using his performance object to represent his “King of Mystery” persona. As part of the influx of luchadores to “crossover” into mainstream U.S. professional wrestling in the mid-90’s, his entrance was significant to the “Latin Explosion” into the U.S. market which, in turn, marked a convergence of lucha libre aesthetics into a predominately white controlled U.S. wrestling circuit apathetic to the traditional and ritual customs of Mexican performance. An example of the friction caused by this convergence can be best highlighted by a match held in which Rey Mysterio’s mask was the trophy of the bout (or *lucha de apuesta*). He was informed that he was to lose the match or forfeit his job in the WCW (now owned by WWE).

In Mexico, when a wrestler loses his mask, it’s the high point of the night and maybe the year. There’s a moment of pride: The winner takes the mask and treats it like a sacred trophy. It’s a matter of respect to the profession as well as to the wrestler. But in America, things are different. Nash and Hall (Mysterio’s

⁶⁸ Roberts, Jeremy. 2009. *Rey Mysterio: The Man Behind the Mask*. New York: World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. Print. p. 46.

opponents the night he was unmasked) started playing with the mask in the ring. Kevin stuck it on the back of his head. Not exactly a lot of respect for tradition there.⁶⁹

The “biographical” account provided in this passage possesses the ability to be analyzed on different levels of interpretation that aren’t necessarily exclusive. First, the Mysterio biography provided is a product of the WWE, itself a performative piece of dialogue that may in fact be utilized to claim superiority of its brand over past competitors, highlighting its resilience and authenticity in the U.S. professional wrestling market. Second, the circumstance that Mysterio might lose his job if he had not taken off the mask is lost within the blurring of reality and theater that wrestlers exercise both in and out of staged performance. In his WWE written biography, for example, Rey says that he wasn’t ready to lose his mask but considered the idea that losing it might help boost his career. However, what is significant about this passage is its ability to narrate Mysterio’s performative disdain for the lack of respect for lucha libre in U.S. professional wrestling. It is clear that Mysterio was opposed to the manner in which he lost his mask. The “sacred trophy,” “rich” in lucha libre performance and tradition, was tarnished of its meaning by the temporality of the aesthetic in the U.S. market. Once the WCW script writers decided that the mask was not a lucrative venture for narrative, they seemingly possessed an inability to understand the performer’s connection to the lucha libre aesthetic and his performance object.

If we apply Orejuela’s model of body as cultural artifact in terms of how Mysterio decorates his performative body with cultural meanings, this serves as an example of how

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 199.

significance and meaning become drastically altered once patrons (in this case AAA to WCW) and collective communities (AAA to WCW wrestlers and fans) are changed. In this way, Mysterio's performative body provides multiple meanings from which to view his cultural figure. In opposition of how the performer intended to present himself, WCW altered ways in which his body could be read that included a mocking of the Mexican cultural tradition and his persona. His ineffectual body, so strongly connected to the nationalized themes of lucha libre via his mask, was then utilized to serve the white monolithic masculinity in the U.S. professional wrestling structure due to both Nash and Hall's performative onslaught and mockery of the mask's aesthetic. This mockery which lacked a "sacred" display during the unmasking is considered disrespectful by Mysterio, whether performatively or not.

While wrestling without his mask for a period of time in WCW, Mysterio participated as part of a group or "stable" of wrestlers who called themselves the Filthy Animals, depicting stereotypical U.S. constructions of the hyper-sexual, thieving Mexican gangsters who loved to party. "Positioning the Animals as a fusion of hip-hop style, professional wrestling, and Latino exoticism, the WCW attempted to capitalize on the three strongest cultural forces of the past few years."⁷⁰ The company would eventually be bought out by the then hugely popular WWE in 2001 while Mysterio decided to perform again in *Arena México* for the CMLL. It is not until a year later that the WWE offered him a contract; and Mysterio was persuaded to utilize his mask and

⁷⁰ Serrato, Phillip. Ed. Nicholas Sammond. 2005. "Not Quite Heroes: Race, Masculinity, and Latino Professional Wrestlers." *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Print. p. 253.

original persona by WWE talent relations and development. Rey explains in his WWE biographical book, “Tradition could still be served by bringing back the mask... Eventually WWE and I did some shows in Mexico, where I wrestled in my mask. I was a little nervous about that aspect: Would the fans go for it, having seen me without it? But they completely accepted it. And so have I.”⁷¹ Upon resurrecting his lucha libre performance object, Mysterio and the WWE began dramatically investing in alterations to la máscara and marketing it as a sacred object in his performance. The mask became the focal point of his DVD’s in terms of titles, themes, and cover artwork. Mysterio’s masks remain a successful product for sale online and at live events.

He also began wearing bright contact lenses with his mask, aiding erasure of the performer beneath and giving life to the performance object by further fusing the mask to the body. This fusing of body and performance object helps to suspend disbelief by positioning the performer as an entity, a quasi-super hero status many enmascarados seek as técnicos. Bright contacts also manipulate pre-determined Western representations of racialized bodies, creating space that disrupts hegemonic assumptions of brown eyed Mexicano nationhood. The small pupiled contacts also function with the mask to transform Rey’s character into an exotic entity that allows him to be more than human, a representation of both pre-Hispanic Mexico and its European colonizers- the body as nation. The following is a description of Rey Mysterio’s new mask during a performative

⁷¹Roberts, Jeremy. 2009. *Rey Mysterio: The Man Behind the Mask*. New York: World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. Print. p. 244.

interview in his WWE DVD entitled *The Man Behind the Mask* conducted by Matt Striker, a white U.S. professional wrestler, and commentator:

I keep the design that my uncle one day created. I did change a couple of things on this mask. I have a cross on the front. My uncle had a crown for “Rey” for “the king” and I put an Aztec calendar on the back and my uncle had just the regular old school shoelace. That’s how they would tie the masks back in the day. You know? Like a shoelace. So I’d just kind of put the Velcro up in the front, put an Aztec calendar in the back, put a cross on the front, left the birds, the eyes, and the eyebrows pretty much the same and like I said now the only thing I do is pretty much swap the colors and every now and then I’ll get a little creative for *WrestleMania*.⁷²

Mysterio emphasizes generational transfer and tradition by discussing the similarities his new mask has with that of his uncle’s. Through this dialogue, Mysterio creates parallels with the *Masked Men* claim that lucha libre represents the “essence as Mexicans from the Aztecs” via the new calendar added on the back of his mask. This Aztec calendar (along with the newly placed cross on the front) operate to represent a fusion of the Aztecs with Spanish Catholicism, a trope of ritualistic indigenous dances that represent negotiation between Europe and pre-Hispanic Mexico. Striker then responds to this description saying, “I like how you swapped the crown for the true King.” In an eerily short and colonial retort to a very detailed description, Striker negates any connection la máscara may have with Aztec representation or a generational transfer.

However, by expressing an appreciation for the cross of the “true king” that replaced the crown, Striker is also expressing a preference for a Christian god over the self-crowning of Mysterio, Sr. as a king within the realm of lucha libre performance. While ignoring the complex and historical mestizo narrative of multi-culturalism relevant

⁷² WWE: *Rey Mysterio: The Life of a Masked Man*. 2011. WWE. Film.

to Mexican national identity, his very curt preference for the Christian cross represents an underlying support for European conquest symbolism via the policing of “true kings”- in this case European Catholicism opposing self-rule in one’s native home or the lucha libre wrestling world.

Striker’s response and interpretation of Rey’s dialogue is quite fitting for WWE representation if we consider the rhetoric used to fortify its performative global supremacy that I explored in Chapter 1. European “trueness” once again works as the framework from which to gauge and measure meaning, in this case the significance of the mask. In addition, the significance of the Aztec calendar on the mask is briefly mentioned and unexplored, promulgating erasure of indigenous symbolism for western European semiotics of faith. The significance of this dialogue allows for a better understanding of the way Mysterio’s nationalized body possesses the ability to construct multiple meanings. While Mysterio’s explanation of the mask and the mask itself suggest clear semiotics alluding to the complex history of Levi’s paradigmatic Mexican as mestizo and its relationship with how the PBS *Masked Men* documentary discussed the “essence of Mexicans from Aztecs,” the emphasis was shifted by the interviewer to point out hegemonic constructions of faith that exist in the U.S. In turn, the segment offered an opportune moment to help explain lucha libre’s relationship with aspects of Mexico’s culture and nationalism to a group of unfamiliar U.S. wrestling fans, but ultimately was disregarded for an alignment with popular U.S. Eurocentric ideology.

The multiple layers of meaning can be better understood through the concept of insider and outsider audiences, where informed lucha libre enthusiasts and/or ethnically

Mexican persons may possess the ability to understand Mysterio's representation of nation via semiotics and those "outside" this realm were not provided the opportunity.

Coco Fusco understands these situations as subaltern performances:

Performance by artists of colour in the U.S. takes place against the backdrop of the subjection of subaltern cultures to centuries of regulation and economic exploitation by outsiders... a split was forged between subaltern performance for insiders and outsiders, and between patterns of reception for each group.⁷³

While Fusco emphasizes the "survival strategies" these certain performances provided for black communities in the U.S., this model can be relevantly utilized to understanding the multiple layers of interpretation exist between that of lucha libre and U.S. professional wrestling fans. Out of the use of subaltern performance arises the ability to create subversive theater. I argue that an exemplary element of Mysterio's cultural figure utilizes subversion in the form of his "619" theme.

THE THIRD SPACE OF "619"

The number "619" is a thematic device consistently referenced in Mysterio's performance upon joining the WWE. As the area code of his birthplace in southern San Diego, it represents the "grey area" of contact zone through narrative that sits on the border of two countries that are highly nationalized in both WWE performance and U.S. popular culture. It is embodied with his character through his tattoos, theme song, products, and a finishing move that elicits lauding roars of audience approval. So important is the performance of body as geography that a segment in Mysterio's WWE

⁷³ Fusco, Coco. 1995. "Performance and Power of the Popular." *Let's Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance*. Seattle: Bay Press. Print. p. 160.

“biographical” *619* DVD documents the luchador and his son at a tattoo parlor while he has the number stenciled onto the bulk of his left outside forearm. Perhaps another example of performative lucha libre generational transfer, Mysterio asks for approval from 6 year-old Dominik regarding the artwork. He makes certain that the stencil is visible from afar before the needle begins penetrating his skin. This is artwork that is meant to be displayed performatively. While his tattoo is worked on, the camera gazes over the collection of Mysterio’s body pieces. On his right forearm, the Aztec mask that sits in the middle of the calendar on his mask resides as the centerpiece of a cross, nodding to the continual trope of mixing the indigenous and colonial cultures of Mexico. Adorned in a T-shirt that reads “San Diego Original”, Mysterio exclaims, “Remember man, any time you’re down in San Diego, come down to Pacific Beach- Avalon Tattoo. Ask for my boy Jason he’ll hook you up” before leaving the parlor.⁷⁴ The emphasis of locality in Mysterio’s performance is not an anomaly. One has to only observe his entrance to the ring to understand how crucial the San Diego area is to the construction of his character in the traveling theatre of WWE. This constant emphasis of 619 is better understood through close reading of Mysterio’s entrance to the ring during the pinnacle of yearly wrestling events.

WrestleMania is the annual premier pay-per-view of WWE theatre, often referred to as the “Super Bowl” of professional wrestling. Since joining the wrestling promotion, Mysterio often practices more elaborate preparation in the way he dresses and presents himself at the foremost spectacle. One such night was April 2nd, 2006, the 22nd

⁷⁴ *WWE: Rey Mysterio: 619*. 2003. WWE. Film.

anniversary of the show at which Mysterio was set to take on Randy Orton and Kurt Angle for the World Heavyweight Championship in a *Triple Threat* match. As the lights dim at a sold out All State arena in the Chicago suburb of Rosemont, Illinois; drums buildup the beginning of a live performance of Mysterio's entrance music performed by San Diego Nu Metal rock band P.O.D.⁷⁵ The song "Booyaka 619" then erupts into the chorus and first verse:

Ya llego el Rey Mysterio/ Bato cabron de San Diego/ Flash up on the scene like a brown crusader/ Blowing up screens like space invaders/ Too much damage for one to manage/ Going 51 50 'speaky Spanglish'/ Aste a un lado estoy pesado/ Vivo la vida peleando pecados/ Estados Unidos al otro lao/ A puebla Canada 619 solao/ Do it for my people yeah you gotta love it/ 'Mexican' across the stomach/ So think nothing of it/ but love it⁷⁶

As P.O.D. performs in a "51 50 Spanglish" delivery, the lyrics are rapped in a back and forth mixture of both English and Spanish, underlying the importance of the 619 area as a contact zone of cultural and lingual hybridization, a third space between national territories and a U.S. space that has been "infiltrated." The first two bars introduce Mysterio as a "cabron" or "bastard" of San Diego, followed by a description of the luchador as a "brown crusader." By articulating these labels, one is inclined to view Mysterio as a fatherless child in San Diego, instantaneously showing up in areas with both brown skin and the militaristic intentions of the Roman Catholic church.⁷⁷ This revisits the binaries that construct Mexican culture as a mixture of the indigenous and colonial. By "blowing up screens like a space invader" (bar 4), the wrestler is entering the

⁷⁵ *WWE: Rey Mysterio: The Biggest Little Man*. 2007. WWE. Film.

⁷⁶ Full lyrics can be found at http://www.lyricsmania.com/booyaka_619_lyrics_rey_mysterio.html. Accessed 5/1/2013. Web.

⁷⁷ "Crusader" may also refer to trope of luchadores as comic book superheroes.

U.S. domestic space via the television by unwanted infiltration, stressing the anxieties of “reconquest” expressed in dominant white U.S. culture.⁷⁸ The verse is concluded with a dedication to Mysterio’s “people”, nodding to the text of “Mexican” tattooed across his stomach, while also telling his audience to embrace him and not to worry about his display of body as nation: “So think nothing of it/ but love it.” This song literally sets the stage for Mysterio’s appearance.

Leo Chavez discusses the U.S. hegemonic anxieties of reconquest in his book entitled *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens and the Nation*. Chavez articulates how Mexico, Mexican immigrants, and those born in the U.S. of Mexican origin are the focus of the “Latino Threat” narratives that have been repeated in order to establish racialized common-sense truths. These narratives operate to construct conceptions of the “illegal alien” as criminal, a “space invader” infiltrating for the reconquest of U.S. land, unwilling to learn English or integrate into “American” culture, Roman Catholics who exercise “out-of-control” fertility, and a threat to national security. He goes on to discuss how this “illegality” is socially, culturally, and politically constructed through news sources, magazines, lawmakers, movies, and popular media rhetoric’s depictions of generalized Latinos. Criminality is “written” upon bodies of migrants by the state. Chavez points to circulating U.S. news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* to articulate on themes of reconquest, invasion, and anxiety concerning a “vanishing border.” One such illustration in *U.S. News and World Report* depicted a line

⁷⁸ Chavez, Leo R. 2008. *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*. Stanford University Press. Print.

of men emerging from Mexico on a map ready to step on about where San Diego is located under the headline “Our Troubled Neighbors- Dangers for U.S.” These depictions work to establish Latinos as “out of place”, “dangerous”, and “pollution” within the “purity” of U.S. culture.⁷⁹

This depiction of infiltration is utilized through subversive performance to introduce Mysterio to the ring. However, while this song is a self-declaration of space invasion into the U.S. domestic space of television, it encourages the audience to “think nothing of it/ but love it” and thus relax infiltration anxieties concerning Mexicans. The track’s use of “50 51 Spanglish” works to create insider and outsider audience reception, carving out a performative space for multilingual and multiethnic groups within the domain of WWE which is often constructed in terms of binary national boundaries. In this way, Mysterio’s body is used as a performative tool to encourage a conceptual third space between constructed national boundaries and works to create a symbolic identity on his cultural figure for marginalized Mexicans and Mexican Americans who are often displaced as a result of U.S. racialized hierarchy and criteria.

After the first verse, Mysterio springs from under the metal entrance ramp in an extravaganza of pyrotechnics that is common of his habitual journey to the ring. But instead of making his way toward the ring (as is expected by the common spectator), he walks backstage before appearing with P.O.D. on a raised suspended platform before the audience in a costume that resembles that of Toltec tradition, often described in Aztec oral tradition and pictographs; and romanticized by contemporary groups in central

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 25, 27-28, 31-32, 45-47.

Mexico (see Fig. 2). “The costume represents who I am down deep inside. It’s a form of homage to my past and my ancestors, not just a piece of wrestling gear.”⁸⁰ As Mysterio *infiltrates* the ring “like space invaders” garnered in a headdress that he describes as a dedication to Canek, a luchador known as the Mayan Prince⁸¹, he stands on the middle ropes of a corner turnbuckle, raising his hands and greeting cheering fans with kisses and raised arms.



Illustration 2: A photograph from Gray Hawn's *Romanticizing Mexico* collection on display at Austin's Mexic-Arte museum.

As the match commences, all three performers engage in a high speed bout of theatre, blending Mysterio’s lucha libre high flying acrobatics with Angle and Orton’s display of U.S. style “power” maneuvers. Mysterio will go on to win the match and his first World Heavyweight Championship with the use of his 619 finishing move. This move requires the performer to utilize the boundaries of the ropes to swing his body

⁸⁰ Roberts, Jeremy. 2009. *Rey Mysterio: The Man Behind the Mask*. New York: World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. Print. p. 121.

⁸¹ It is important to explicate that these headdresses historically had no connection to war, but rather nobility and contemporary dance rituals.

outside of the ring and back in to strike his opponent in the face with his boots before performing a “West Coast Pop” for a roll-up pin victory. Mysterio’s acrobatic use of his body to represent geography (as I will articulate) is quite telling as he physically negotiates between the conflicting theatrical spaces that exist in and outside of the ring. Inside is where he is able to claim victory, where rules are abided and championships won. Inside the ring is where Mysterio prefers to be as a técnico but is able to utilize the momentum of swinging outside of it to deliver his signature move. On the contrary, outside of the ring is a space of “no man’s land”, where rules can be manipulated and foreign objects used to one’s advantage when the referee isn’t looking. Separating these very different theatrical spaces representative of geographies are the ropes that serve as a boundary distinguishing what forms of behavior are acceptable respectively. It is this “619” finishing move that metaphorically exemplifies Mysterio’s performance as a Mexican American existing in the “third space” between borders.

Revisiting the WWE *619* DVD similarly narrates this constructed space, as Mysterio and a camera man take a journey in and out of Mexico. “I like coming in and out of Tijuana now that I have a home out in San Diego. I visit my parents down here. I got my brothers. I got my mother-in-law. That’s as good as it gets for me right now.” As Mysterio narrates, the camera shows a first person view in a vehicle entering Mexico through a border check point. This narration is followed by Mysterio meeting up with fellow lucha libre wrestlers, one whom he hands a WWE Rey Mysterio T-shirt and embraces. After visiting a training facility, an arena, a food cart and a man playing guitar outside, Mysterio concludes his trip with the following narration:

I think if you have a family like my parents when they decided for me to be born in the U.S., you have a lot more security in the States. I don't know if it sounds wrong but, you know, it's the truth. In the States, you got to go by the rules and that's the way things are over there. You don't follow your rule, you get punished for it. Right here, I think you have rules but then when it comes down to it, you can also make up rules. I love living in San Diego. It's peaceful, it's quiet. I guess I like living by the rules.⁸²

Mysterio's sentiments concerning comfort within the states are narrated while scenes are once again focused on inner city roads of Tijuana⁸³ and the highway leading up to the border leaving Mexico. This segment of the DVD displays the congruency between Mysterio's relationship with the ring's borders and the relationship between the national borders of Mexico and the U.S. while simultaneously describing the country of Mexico as a land with little security, no punishments, and made up rules. Mysterio's continual theme of the 619 area demonstrate his character's partialness for his home in San Diego but also for his mobility between nations; and his finishing maneuver metaphorically represents this partialness in a codified physical form. Mysterio performs kinetically to analogously flail his body between nations. The rope is a fitting metaphor for a socially constructed border between Mexico, the outside "no man's land" where one can "make up rules" and the ring or U.S. that serves as a "safe haven of rules" for his técnico/face character. The physical impact of his finishing maneuver occurs at the border of these spaces and allows him victory after rolling his opponent up in a "West Coast Pop." San Diego then serves as a home both inside and outside of the U.S., a space both a part of and separate from the ring, a middle ground of carved space for Mysterio's

⁸² WWE: *Rey Mysterio: 619*. 2003. WWE. Film.

⁸³ During this segment, three men are filmed in SWAT gear with assault rifles riding on the back of a truck with "Policia" on its side.

subaltern performance of body to declare his identity and impact. His body becomes San Diego as a space shifting contradictions and identities. His performance mobilizes and contradicts U.S. common sense classifications of home within nationalized territories and allows for the creation of a “third country.” As José Saldívar explains, this third country or third space represents “a social space of subaltern encounters... in which people geopolitically forced to separate themselves now negotiate with one another and manufacture new relations, hybrid cultures and multiple-voiced aesthetics.”⁸⁴ Mysterio’s ability to perform third country, however, distributes multiple meanings within both the model of insider/outsider audiences as well as the mediation of ringside commentary and other WWE structural conduits.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing Mysterio’s performance of body through dialogue, body art, kinetics, spectacle, costume, and mask; one gains a better understanding of how his cultural figure works within the structural WWE narrative. His body contradicts the encoding of separate national territories while also diminishing the borders that construct them. The multiple and, at times, subversive, meanings are significant strategies in negotiating cultures within the hierarchical performance structure of U.S. professional wrestling. This performance structure is quite reflective of the hegemonic categorization of racialized and nationalized bodies as I have previously discussed in Chapter 1 as well as this categorization’s instability.

⁸⁴ Saldívar, José. 1997. *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Print.

Orejuela's model of body as cultural artifact helps to explore how patrons and audience possess the ability to change and manipulate intended meanings of the artist/performer. Analyzing the historical and cultural implications of la máscara provide an identification of the tropes and aesthetic that can be manipulated or changed in response to the pre-mentioned shifting. Conflict may arise when these intended cultural traditions are not honored or neglected. Through the mediation of WWE performance structure, specifically ringside commentary, these traditions create new meanings for those unfamiliar with lucha libre and/or Mexican ritualistic semiotics. Fusco's explanation of insider and outsider audiences helps to understand the different levels of reception these meanings promulgate when elements of multilingualism and multiethnicism are implemented into the performance. Mysterio at times utilizes subversive tactics to construct a subaltern performance that challenges the hegemonic anxieties that are explored by Leo Chavez. In addition, the kinetic performance of Mysterio's finishing maneuver parallel his perceptions of home and mobility; and carve out a performative space for marginalized and dislocated Mexicans and Mexican Americans within the U.S.

Nationalized geography and space work as vital factors within the locus of Mysterio's cultural figure. An identification of the nationalized territories that Mysterio's performance operates within constructs a duality from which to manipulate, create contradictions, and promulgate multiple meanings of reception. In Chapter 3, I will engage patterns of reception and community within Mysterio's fanbase through the analysis of online social communities.

Chapter 3: Mysterio's Online Fan Participation and Diverse Paratexts

INTRODUCTION

This chapter desires to explore the ways in which Rey Mysterio's fans both collectively and individually work to help form his cultural figure; as well as the phenomenon of audience performance in professional wrestling that supports this cultural figure. This phenomenon is created in response to the subversive performance of Rey Mysterio in addition to a desire for fans to express sentiments regarding the direction of WWE narrative and the socio-political climate of the United States. While institutional control (e.g.- ringside commentary) of the WWE provide us with candid examples of colonial reach via cultural globalization and Mysterio's specific performance allows the spectator to identify the negotiation and subversion within the text; examining fan response is exemplary in exploring how these texts are read and re-appropriated.

Building off of Henry Jenkins' convergence theory and Jonathan Gray's concepts of paratext, I will explore how fans "freeze" moments in WWE narrative to express and discuss what they believe to be significant meanings inherent in the text via social networking sites like YouTube. I will also utilize the pre-mentioned theory with Shane Toepfer's notions of "play" to argue how members of the professional wrestling audience are positioned as both producers and consumers of the theater. In this way, the audience influences how identity of the performer is constructed vis-à-vis the subversion of narratives. Although WWE text has traditionally presented a white monolithic expression of power and masculinity, this chapter seeks to emphasize how rich back

channels of online paratext/performance as well as performances of live audiences at times serve as acts of resistance toward contested material. In addition, I will integrate Deborah Paredez's work in regard to Latina/o performance of memory to engage how fans both online and attending performances utilize Rey Mysterio's body as a conduit through which to honor the late Eddie Guerrero and Latino heritage; and continue the trope of immortality via resurrection characteristic of lucha libre performance. Further, I argue that participatory fan culture online possesses the ability to produce paratexts that work as "protest theater" defined by Harry Elam by positioning the audience as a performer with the ability to articulate social causes and utilize theater as a social weapon.⁸⁵

This study is significant for a number of reasons. Analyzing audience performative resistance helps us to better understand the nature of the structural forces framing WWE narrative. The importance of the relationship between the wrestler and the audience is crucial in understanding Mysterio's performance classification as protest theater. Irene Webley has explained that the spectacle of wrestling performance is constituted by this relationship where the dramatic tensions are found within the moral and ethnic coding of wrestlers.⁸⁶ In this way, the performative text depends as heavily on a participatory audience as it does for the performers themselves. While Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* discusses convergence as a representation of "a cultural shift as

⁸⁵ Elam, Harry. 2001. "An Initiation into the Rituals of Social Protest Theater: The Cultural Politics of El Teatro Campesino and the Black Revolutionary Theater." *Taking It to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, Print. p. 1-18.

⁸⁶ Webley, Irene A. 1986. "Professional Wrestling: The World of Roland Barthes Revisited." *Semiotica*. 58:59-81. Print.

consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” and discusses “the work -and play- spectators perform in the new media system,”⁸⁷ professional wrestling fandom offers a unique source of participatory culture as spectators and consumers are increasingly engaging in spaces of online paratext production rooted in a performance in which audience involvement is already required and encouraged.

Further, video clips or “frozen” events that are archived and shown on YouTube, as well as other mediated reactions of audience members, present us with examples of viewer tastes that are performed in online forums and trade publications. This highlights the importance of audience performance in U.S. professional wrestling and lucha libre. In addition, interrogating Mysterio’s cultural figure and fans through the scope of racial performance seeks to explore often neglected fields of study concerning race and fandom. While Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington’s *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* conceptualizes the study of fans as the study of the “key structuring mechanisms by which contemporary culture and society work,”⁸⁸ the text openly identifies its omission of potential articles examining race and fandom specifically as one of the many “inevitably missing genres in the vast world of popular culture.”⁸⁹ This points to the importance and neglect of catering to such a topic that would emphasize race and racial hierarchy as they pertain to audience reception, given the working

⁸⁷Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press. p. 3

⁸⁸ Gray, John, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington. 2007. “Introduction: Why Study Fans?” *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. New York University Print. p. 16.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

definition of fan studies as the study of “key structuring mechanisms” within a culture or society. I argue that this inattention to racial constructs presents problematic issues that omit important dynamics of fandom and online participatory culture. In this way, this chapter seeks to explore the relationship between fandom and its interconnections with ethnicity, nation, race, and racial hierarchy in order to better understand how these classificatory systems work within U.S. popular culture and its ever growing convergence within mediated digital forms.

CONVERGENCE THEORY, PARATEXT, AND SMARKS

In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins notes that “the circulation of media content-across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders-depends heavily on consumers’ active participation”⁹⁰ and that:

“YouTube functions as a media archive where amateur curators scan the media environment, searching for meaningful bits of content, and bringing them to a larger public... fans are remixing contemporary content; and everyone has the ability to freeze a moment out of the “flow” of mass media and try to focus greater attention on what just happened.”⁹¹

This act of “freezing” moments is highly reflective of what online wrestling fans consider to be significant points in wrestling history; and the ways in which fans interpret said events are fortified by the comments that are left by an audience often times performing in suspended disbelief. In this way, the circulation of WWE media content exists within digital space of performative interaction and Mysterio’s cultural figure

⁹⁰ Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press. p. 3

⁹¹ Ibid. p. 275.

within this space is partially formed through (and highly dependent upon) the mediated performance of fans expressing what they deem is significant in regard to the text.

Jonathan Gray defines *paratext* as both “distinct from” and “intrinsically *part of* the text.”⁹² Gray borrows paratextuality from Gerard Genette who utilized the term to discuss materials surrounding a literary text. I will be using paratext in this chapter to refer to fan-made materials like YouTube comments, fanzine comments, and the framing of highlighted videos that exist “distinct from” the original texts of aired WWE broadcasts, home DVDs, or published literature but ultimately work along with these items to manage them and fill them with the meanings that the fan culture associates with them. Gray goes on to discuss how paratext “fills in space between” audience, text, and industry; is the “threshold” between the inside and the outside; and is the study of how meaning is created.⁹³ I will be utilizing the concept of paratext to emphasize its integral part in the forming of Mysterio’s cultural figure. Congruently, I argue that WWE fan participatory culture “fills in the spaces” of Mysterio’s subversive performance by creating and articulating its meanings. Since Mysterio’s performance of body and dialogue exist within the production or “inside” text of the WWE, then the text’s relationship with its audience is met at the threshold of social networking sites and audience participation which ultimately serve to give meaning to Mysterio’s cultural figure.

⁹² Gray, Jonathan. 2010. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York: New York University Press. Print. p. 6.

⁹³ *Ibid.* p. 23,25,26.

In addition to mediated spaces online and trade publications, live wrestling events offer important texts involving audience performance and participation, how audience members work to construct Mysterio's cultural figure, and themes of body and geography that these participatory audience members utilize to form Latino representations in WWE theater. While second wave fandom studies have deemphasized fans as a counterforce to existing social hierarchies,⁹⁴ this framework has greatly underestimated individual motivations for enjoying professional wrestling. As third wave studies focus on technology, "modernity," and the identities and communities fans form through a "mediated world"; the study of fans engaging at live events seems less fitting for the current paradigm, let alone the concept of social protest theater. This is unfortunate because the participatory audience involved in wrestling performance offers ripe avenues to explore the symbolic exchange of popular culture that takes place between performers and fans at live wrestling events. While different scholars take on wrestling as a critique of liberal capitalism or a conservative form that reinforces ethnic boundaries,⁹⁵ there lacks crucial scholarship in the myriad ways fans engage the "text" of performance.

Shane Toepfer's dissertation entitled "The Playful Audience: Professional Wrestling, Media Fandom, and the Omnipresence of Media Smarks" explores the nature of the genre of professional wrestling "where audience members are positioned as parts of the production and consumption of the text, as well as the way that identity is played

⁹⁴ Gray, John, Cornel Sanvoss, and C. Lee Harrington. 2007. "Introduction: Why Study Fans?" *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. New York University Print. p.6-7.

⁹⁵ Levi, Heather. 2008. *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity*. Duke University Press. Print. p. 137.

with by both the performers themselves and the fans of wrestling, the notion of play becomes crucial in understanding the genre itself.”⁹⁶ Utilizing this model of “play” in regard to how fans create and facilitate the meaning of Mysterio’s cultural figure, this chapter will interrogate the production and consumption of fans within YouTube channels, fanzines, and other mediated sites for the distribution of paratext. Toepfer utilizes the term “smark” (the combination of “smart” and “mark”) to articulate how wrestling fans typically exist on a spectrum that is both aware of the scripted aspect of WWE events and willing to accept these narratives in a suspension of disbelief. Specifically, I am interested in the creation of meaning as it pertains to constructions of race and racial performance within the paratext, and the blurred lines between suspension of disbelief and recognition of story line authorship. Toepfer explains:

...criticism of professional wrestling, however, is far too general and all encompassing, as it presumes that the audience for these texts are somehow modern versions of these easy “marks,” vulnerable entities that are unaware they are being given the illusion of sport rather than actual competition. As we shall see, this is not true for many fans of professional wrestling, as the evaluative criteria employed by these fans mirrors consumption processes with other, more privileged media forms.⁹⁷

“PLAYING” WITH PROTEST THEATER

Examples of this ability to “become” or “play” within the spectrum of the smark are evident in a YouTube clip showing a moment of celebration in the live event between Mysterio’s brief winning and losing of the WWE championship in a taped backstage

⁹⁶ Toepfer, Shane Matthew. 2011. “The Playful Audience: Professional Wrestling, Media Fandom, and the Omnipresence of Media Smarks.” *Communication Dissertations*. Paper 33. Georgia State University. Atlanta, Georgia. Acquired 1/15/2014.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 17

performance where a number of wrestlers are congratulating Mysterio and spraying champagne on him. By uploading this segment, fans “freeze” the moment of Mysterio’s triumph by archiving online while simultaneously posting comments that critique WWE’s plot decisions. One fan comments, “This was such a great night for him and they couldn't even let him hold the title for more than 2 hours. :(“⁹⁸ Another YouTube segment that shows the last minutes of Rey’s match to win the title express similar grievances. “WWE needs to make Rey the WWE champion again. This is just stupid. It is always about Cena.” “God I hate Cena so much!!! Once again a Mexican gets screwed by a less deserving white man!” “Eddie Guerrero is looking down from heaven and he's saying WWE sucks.”⁹⁹ In these YouTube paratexts, fans express their frustrations with this particular direction in WWE plot and, in some cases, also mark their frustrations as character-based. While the WWE as a company is blamed for the turn in storyline, so too is the white baby face character John Cena for “stealing the spotlight.” The late Eddie Guerrero (arguably the best Latino WWE wrestler of all time among fan circles and long-time friend of Mysterio) is evoked in the later quote. This both aligns Mysterio’s cultural figure with the rich tradition of lucha libre in the company and critiques the unequal alignments of power within the WWE’s story-telling process. Grievances concerning intersections of racialized and nationalized marginalization are confronted by fan Sammy

⁹⁸ Sanchez, Nelson via JohnCenaApproved. “WWE Raw 7/25/11 - Rey Mysterio Celebrates his WWE Championship Victory.” *YouTube*. Accessed 11/23/2013. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQirSdhEJj8>>. Web.

⁹⁹ Sterling451513Rocks, Sammy Pineda, and thehardcorekid300 respectively via DXHardyBoysFan. “WWE Rey Mysterio wins the WWE Championship on RAW 2011.” *YouTube*. Accessed 11/23/2013. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79CEMMaPaMs>>. Web.

Pineda, whose post points to the familiar trope of WWE plot favoring white men while channeling this disappointment through his “hatred” of John Cena.

In this way, this particular instance of fandom is able to confront issues of inequality while also “playing” in a state of suspended disbelief. Toepfer also points to Brian Sutton-Smith’s “seven rhetorics of play,” one of which emphasizes play as a struggle for power in which “subordinate classes sometimes subvert these play forms to express their own hidden rhetorics of resistance or subversion.”¹⁰⁰ I argue that fans act within the spectrum of the “smark” to both play within the narrative while subversively critiquing its rules and structure. In this way, fans like Sammy Pineda possess the ability to accept the theatrical narrative of WWE on their own terms via mediated online spaces such as YouTube commentary by both performing and overtly expressing their displeasure. Their loyalty to Mysterio’s cultural figure works congruent with their refusal to accept WWE storylines that represent the performer as ineffectual. I argue that these performances of Mysterio’s online fans disrupt norms regarding the racialized nationalist rhetoric within the WWE by enacting protest theater in the realm of paratext.

These instances reflect Harry Elam’s research concerning “the communal experiences with the spectators and performers united in a bond symbolic protest.”¹⁰¹ While not all of the fans commenting on this particular YouTube channel may be as adamant or even agree with Pineda’s performance of protest, these online spaces offer

¹⁰⁰ Sutton-Smith, Brian, 1997. *The Ambiguity of Play*. MA: Harvard University Press. Print. p. 74.

¹⁰¹ Elam, Harry. 2001. “An Invitation into the Rituals of Social Protest Theater: The Cultural Politics of El Teatro Campesino and the Black Revolutionary Theater.” *Taking It to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. p. 12.

contemporary examples of the ways Latino subaltern groups can gather and respond to one another's comments. I argue that these interactions can be used to subvert US popular culture, constructions of US nationalism, and white supremacist society by allowing participants to voice disapproval with derogatory performative depictions of Mexican identity (in this case, ineffectualness) by allowing spectators to gather together in communal experience. Online audience members "play along" with narratives that they identify as institutionally influenced and point out the unequal balance of power that is afforded to white monolithic masculinity and the parallel narrative that is built alongside it involving U.S. dominance over the country of Mexico.

It is in this way that performative fan paratext works to build Mysterio's cultural figure as a representation of Mexican people struggling for equal representation in an American-based company that favors white monolithic masculinity in a performative system of racial and national hierarchy. Paratexts like these and other fan websites that desire to "freeze" milestones of Mysterio's career for archiving purposes exemplify how Mysterio's fans contribute to the construction of his cultural figure through framing and performance. In this way, these particular Mysterio fans are exemplar representatives of the Shane Toepfer's smirk. By their refusal to accept story lines that demean the performer, they distance themselves from the "mark" label; yet their parallel determination to engage a suspension of disbelief allows them to imagine contrary story plots (distancing themselves from the "smart") while critiquing the WWE's narrative choices in communal online spaces.

THE EVOCATION OF SURROGATION

The evocation of Eddie Guerrero is significant regarding Mysterio's cultural figure because it strongly links his performance with both his fans and a shared "Latinidad", or common identity among Latinos or Hispanics. Fans actively place Guerrero's maintenance of memory upon Mysterio, who utilizes his body to honor his passed comrade in the form of a gravestone tattoo with Eddie's initials and the words "Guerrero Latino" across his forearm. In his WWE biography book, Mysterio describes a match against Booker T at the 2006 *Great American Bash*:

He kicked and stomped me against the ropes for a minute or so before I turned the tables and got a near pin. The crowd began chanting, "Eddie! Eddie!" the chant that had both commemorated Eddie Guerrero and urged me on in my run for the title... I stunned him with my third 619 of the match, then did a frog splash in honor of Eddie to cover him for the pin.¹⁰²

In her analysis of Tejano performer Selena, Deborah Paredez explicates how latinidad is exemplified through surrogation:

The process of surrogation, what Joseph Roach defines as "the enactment of cultural memory by substitution," is a common practice through which a community remembers and reproduces itself. This memorial process is invariably fraught with struggles over assertions of the community's past, present, and future... Spaces of surrogation thus cut across ideological and temporal divides, offering an illuminating view of the processes by which communities re-remember themselves through the act of mourning one of their fallen members. As a site of surrogation *Selena Forever* held open a space for articulations of affiliation and anxieties about the collective history, representational presence, and future force of latinidad."¹⁰³

¹⁰² Roberts, Jeremy. 2009. *Rey Mysterio: Behind the Mask*. New York: World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. Print. p. 314-316.

¹⁰³Paredez, Deborah. 2009. *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory*. Durham: Duke University Press. Print. p. 99-100.

If we consider Paredez's model of surrogation for latinidad, we are able to find important intersections of Mysterio's performance of body, audience performance, and upkeep/maintenance of the imagined Latina/o wrestling community in regard to what it should be and who should represent it. Mysterio is chosen by the audience to simultaneously redefine and remember what it means to be a Latino wrestler through his body as a substitute for Eddie Guerrero. Not only does this practice connect the audience with Mysterio's performance by dictating the timing and/or whether or not he is to win the theatrical bout, the "Eddie" chant also connects the audience in a communal act of using play to dictate identity. In the previous example of YouTube commentary, this same process was exercised when fan thehardcorekid300 commented "Eddie Guerrero is looking down from heaven and he's saying WWE sucks" to play along and express disapproval with WWE narrative, as well as connect Mysterio's cultural figure with that of Latino legacy. By aligning an opinion of narrative direction with that of a projected posthumous Guerrero, thehardcorekid300 creates space that recognizes Latino wrestlers as a disenfranchised group within the structural constraints of the WWE.

The iconography of Mysterio's cultural figure, then, becomes intrinsically tied to the performance of remembering Eddie Guerrero as an audience ordained representative of Latina/o wrestling within the U.S. His commemorative tattoos in honor of his deceased mentor and friend work as a way to incorporate his displayed performative body as an additional platform for fans to recognize his surrogation. Mysterio's twitter account continues to commemorate the late Guerrero with uploaded pictures of both wrestlers for fans to "retweet" and "favorite." One such picture from November 13, 2013 displays the

two wrestlers embracing with the WWE Tag Team Wrestling belts over the caption: “8 yrs have passed and life on earth will always have an empty spot in many of us, pic.twitter.com/pf6HCIuiDI.” This picture received 1,252 retweets, 1,140 favorites, as well as a comment from a Rey Mysterio fan club twitter account R-Mysterio.Com that reads, “@reymysterio such a beautiful picture of you guys, ♥.” Just as Paradez’s articulation of *Selena Forever* recognized the musical as a way of Latina/o communities to re-remember themselves through the act of mourning and opening up spaces for celebrated surrogation, online sites like Twitter and YouTube as well as live WWE events work as spaces to rearticulate affiliation, anxieties of collective history, and representational presence of Latina/o wrestlers.

BLURRING BINARY LENSES

When the WCW was purchased by the WWE circa 2001, Rey had decided to go wrestle in Mexico for the CMLL. Due to the unmasking incident at WCW, Mysterio was exploring different costumes and looks for the Mexican audience but had decided to retain his name. He explains in his WWE published biography:

...I wasn’t wearing my mask: Once you lose your mask in Mexico, you don’t remask under the same name. That’s part of the tradition. And really, why would you? The fans know who you are already, so what’s the sense of putting on a mask? The mask is all about mystery and the wrestler’s identity in the ring. What is allowed- and this has been done a lot through history- is to come back with a new name and a mask...
But I saw no reason to wrestle as anyone other than Rey Mysterio Jr. I’d been wrestling without a mask for a while. It no longer felt strange.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Roberts, Jeremy. 2009. Rey Mysterio: *The Man Behind the Mask*. New York: World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. Print. p. 232.

Mysterio eventually adopted a look that was “inspired by medieval knights” and chainmail armor and began wearing white contact lenses, which he eventually brought over to the WWE upon the decision to “remask” himself. “(I) had white contact lenses, which gave me white eyes. It was a cool look.”¹⁰⁵ These contacts work to aid erasure of the performer beneath and give life to Mysterio’s performance object by further fusing the mask to his body (many times, Mysterio has worn contact lenses that are color coordinated with his mask and outfit that he frequently changes). This fusing of body and performance object helps to suspend disbelief by positioning the performer as an entity, a quasi-super hero status many enmascarados seek as técnicos. Mysterio usually wears white contacts that emphasize contrast between the iris and pupil. These bright contacts also manipulate pre-determined Western assumptions of racialized bodies, creating space that disrupts these hegemonic representations of brown eyed Mexicano nationhood. The contacts also function with the mask to transform Mysterio’s character into an exotic entity that allows him to be more than human, a representation of both pre-Hispanic Mexico and its European colonizers. Perhaps incidentally, this display of body as nation was realized after Mysterio had taken off his luchador mask, influenced by the ritualistic dances of indigenous Mexico, and began dressing in Western style chainmail with white contacts. The fusing of these very symbolic representations of Mexican nationhood were fully realized once the performer utilized the contacts along with the mask upon entrance to the WWE. By doing so, Mysterio created a buzz that fascinated fans on the internet.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

In fact, answers.yahoo.com produces a number of responses to fans' questions regarding Mysterio's contacts that include: Does Rey Mysterio wear contact lenses? Does Rey Mysterio wear contacts? Does Rey Mysterio wear contacts or are his eyes real? Rey Mysterio contact lenses? Does Rey Mysterio have a fake eye? How come Rey Mysterio's eyeballs look so weird? The use of contact lenses as body and physical performance object fascinate and amaze a number of fans in such a way that questions regarding the authenticity of his eyes are abundant. I argue that this intrigue is brought about by a desire to understand who Rey Mysterio is underneath the mask (the mystery if you will) and that understanding the performer is also dependent on racialized/nationalized constructs that work to categorize bodies into binaries of white/POC and United States/Mexico. Rey's use of contact lenses both blurs these pre-determined Western assumptions of body and confuse a portion of his online audience, prompting them to question what is "natural" for categorization. Put simply, the visual contacts disrupt pre-determined constructions of race. Hence, answers.yahoo.com is an excellent example of how Rey's blurring of the bodily symbolic can be utilized to disrupt his audiences' perceptions as well as ability to place him or "read" his performance and presentation within pre-mentioned categorizations.

Further blurring occurs when Mysterio utilizes symbols from U.S. popular culture along with Aztec and Mexican nationhood for a blurring of binary constructs. Often borrowing from comic book characters and super heroes is both a rich tradition for Mysterio and lucha libre enmascarado practice. During WrestleMania 27, Mysterio made his way to the ring dressed as popular Marvel comic book super hero Captain America

whom, like Mysterio at the event, wears a U.S. flag inspired wardrobe, gloves, and mask.¹⁰⁶ The crowd erupted as Mysterio made his way to the ring at the once-a-year event when Mysterio enjoys wearing exclusive outfits. However, Mysterio's costume differentiated from that of the original Captain America in a number of ways. The pants, like most of his other attire, included the 619 area code down the outside of the legs. Instead of a star on the chest, Mysterio had an Aztec calendar in place. On his mask, he replaced the Captain America "A" with an "M." Mysterio's substitution for the overtly U.S. patriotic uniform, which was created and garnered massive popularity during a nostalgic WWII era, received immense praise from both the audience at WrestleMania 27 and online fans alike. The performer's ability to fuse symbols (that nationalized U.S. constructs work to keep exclusive) provides representational space not only for marginalized Latina/os within the U.S. but also serves to disrupt perceptions of nationalized borders online. On a Facebook fan page entitled "Rey Mysterio- The Master of the 619," Diego Raquelich Machado from Santiago, Chile comments under a picture of Rey Mysterio in Captain America garb: "Cpitan mystreio o capitan mexico?" [sic]¹⁰⁷ In this way, the Mysterio fan from Chile is able to identify the Captain America character as well as the way the luchador has improvised the uniform. Machado desires to know (or finds it intriguing to question) the meaning of the "M" on Mysterio's mask. This inquiry is reflective of the way Mysterio's performance possesses the ability to blur and fuse

¹⁰⁶ coltenbrewster5. September 3rd, 2011. "Epic rey mysterio entrance as CAPTAIN AMERICA!!!" *YouTube*. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFkD57gPaOA>>. Accessed 3/18/2014. Web.

¹⁰⁷ Diego Raquelich Machado. March 23rd, 2014. "Rey Mysterio- The Master of the 619." *Facebook*. <<https://www.facebook.com/ReyMysterioTheMasterOfThe619>>. Accessed 3/24/2014.

representations of nationalism as well as create a space within constructed U.S. nostalgia that honors those of Latino heritage. It is then distributed among a global audience and may be read a way of questioning what it is to be part of “America” in addition to carving out a discursive space for Latino/as within the national borders of the U.S.

THE LANGUAGE OF GEOGRAPHY

Although I argue that the pre-mentioned third space of the 619 area code is utilized kinetically, thematically, and performatively by Mysterio as a blurring of national themes and symbols, this in no way suggests that this utilization aids an erasure of constructed nationalized boundaries or geography. 619, a national code for a geographic location itself, actually works to assert its integral role in bringing together Mysterio fans from different countries and languages around the globe. In fact, a small community of 723 “likes” on the Facebook fan page called “Rey Mysterio 2014”¹⁰⁸ is bombarded with comments of fans from the U.S., Ukraine, Mexico, Chile, Bahrain, Germany, India, Mexico, Albania, and Greece to name a few. While fans enjoy posting comments in local languages that, at times, can be translated through a Bing processor; the most frequent comment for pictures and posts is the number “619” which works as a call of support to Mysterio as well as a way of expressing solidarity among those in the group. In this way, the 619 theme works as a way of crossing physical geographic and linguistic boundaries among fans who enjoy collectively commemorating Mysterio’s performance. In addition, it also points to the importance geography possesses in an online imagined community.

¹⁰⁸ “Rey Mysterio 2014.” <<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Rey-Mysterio-2014/447967571940581>>. *Facebook*. Accessed 3/18/2014. Web.

Chris Berry, Soyoung Kim, and Lynn Spigel's *Electronic Elsewheres* is a collection of essays that explores "how different world populations experience place through media technologies."¹⁰⁹ The term *electronic elsewhere*:

serves as a compelling way to conceptualize the emergent interdisciplinary field of scholarship on media and the production of space. It signals both the material sense of lived environments constructed through media, but also an imaginary "third space" open to alterity and reinvention.¹¹⁰

Within the imagined community of Rey Mysterio 2014, the material sense of lived environments is important to individuals who dictate where they are from on their profile pages as well as the degree in which they are able to communicate with one another within the online space (e.g. - language is heavily influenced by the environments that we inhabit). However, I argue that the use of 619 in the comments as correspondence to posts on the site is particularly congruent with the idea of imaginary "third space" being open to alterity and reinvention. As a mediated and traveling media text, 619 began as number to dictate an area within U.S. national territory to a performative theme that seeks to disrupt and blur constructions of national borders and identity to a global communication device utilized in an imagined online community to support Rey Mysterio, his performance, and solidarity among its members. This movement of the 619 media text is an example of how created meanings are constructed by people that inhabit online imagined communities and not an effect of the online communities themselves. In

¹⁰⁹ Berry, Chris, Soyoung Kim, and Lynn Spigel. 2010. "Introduction: Here, There, and Elsewhere." *Electronic Elsewheres: Media, Technology, and the Experience of Social Space*. Public Worlds, Volume 17. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Print. p. vii.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. xviii.

other words, geography is not disregarded through these online interactions but rather that place and space become more complex as geography moves as a mediated text through these vectors.

As Jenkins points out, this is an example of how participatory cultures work and perform in the “new” media system- across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders. It is in this way that Mysterio’s cultural figure is still heavily influenced by themes of geography at the global level, but the meaning of what that geography means to particular spectators and online groups is subject to change through further mediation of text. This is not to say that glocalization does not occur in communities like Rey Mysterio 2014. Residents of the San Diego area code are present and proud of their hometown hero, posting comments that include “619” in their adoration. However, (from analyzing the interactions of members “liking” each other’s comments and posts) there would seem to be no sort of policing that is done to dictate who is allowed or “authentic” enough to claim the meaning of 619 even though many of these fans participate in its marketability from outside of the United States. This sort of solidarity of open interpretation allows for fans to describe what they feel is the most important part of Mysterio’s cultural figure but also emphasizes the importance of geography in such sites. On the Facebook page “Rey Mysterio- The Master of the 619”, fans are asked in a post “From Which Country You Are ? :) Comment Below ! (Y)” and list Italy, Bangladesh, USA, Tunisia, Australia, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Trinidad & Tobago, Bosnia, South Africa, and Cuba but also carve space for dual inhabitation/origin

for places such as “Chile and United States.”¹¹¹ One fan even posts “EGYPT 100000like for you and 619.” We see here in this later comment that the fan from Egypt recognizes the space of 619 with just as equal and importance as Rey Mysterio himself. In this way, I argue that Mysterio’s performance is essentially tied with geography even at the global level of imagined communities. 619 and Mysterio fan sites carve out space for fan identity in online pages while simultaneously calling attention to the importance geography has in a virtual world.

EXPLOITATION AND MARKETING

Despite the ability of fans to utilize Mysterio’s performance to transform meanings of geography, highlight its importance online, and express a geographically diverse collective of fans from around the world; scholars have also recognized the ability Mysterio’s performance possesses to exploit and categorize the Latino demographic in the professional wrestling audience and throughout the U.S. In her study of young Latino fans in Southern California, Ellen Seiter examined the forms of delivery (internet and television) fans would use to access the WWE as well as the content of storylines that she understands to be vehicles of expansion toward different markets globally. She focuses on Mysterio’s performance particularly to point out its marketability toward young Latino fans:

This (WWE market) strategy- and its success with the Latino boys in my class- are based on securing as broad a global market as possible and on finding ways to attract youth with storylines and characters whose overt

¹¹¹ “Rey Mysterio- The Master of the 619.” *Facebook*. <<https://www.facebook.com/ReyMysterioTheMasterOfThe619>>. Accessed 3/24/2014.

themes are the injustices of ethnic stereotyping and racial conflict... Each aspect of the Mysterio character translates into merchandise and a stylistic association with southern California urban youth and Chicana styles. Mysterio wears a silver cross (a replica is available for sale through the website)... In the WWE, racial insults have been reinvigorated (from past professional wrestling storylines). Storylines involving Rey Mysterio typically contain narrative arcs that take up themes of insult and respect.”¹¹²

An analysis by Serrato depicted different marketing agendas during Mysterio’s time as a member of the Filthy Animals at WCW. “Positioning the Animals as a fusion of hip-hop style, professional wrestling, and Latino exoticism, the WCW attempted to capitalize on three of the strongest cultural forces of the past few years.”¹¹³ This, in turn, has facilitated a Mysterio cultural figure that is both exoticized by audience members for the performance’s utilization of stereotypes and empowering particularly for young Latino boys who (according to Seiter’s examination of Dwayne Johnson’s “The Rock” character) are fascinated with the expressions of ethnic pride combined with hypermasculinity. Serrato offers an example of a sexualized exoticization of Mysterio’s WCW character that reproduced a “rather stale cliché of persons of color as embodying unbridled libidinal energy, a sexuality that ruled their bodies and minds”¹¹⁴ via the Filthy Animals storyline’s representation of Mysterio with an insistent desire for partying and women. A fan writes to *WCW Magazine*: “I love the Filthy Animals. I’m not Hispanic and I don’t come from the streets, but I look up to them.... Rey and Konnan, keep up the

¹¹² Seiter, Ellen. Ed. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Chris, and Anthony Freitas. 2007. “Worldwide Wrestling Entertainment’s Global Reach: Latino Fans and Wrestlers.” *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting*. New York: New York University Press. Print. p. 339, 346, 347.

¹¹³ Serrato, Phillip. Ed. Nicholas Sammond. 2005. “Not Quite Heroes: Race, Masculinity, and Latino Professional Wrestlers.” *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Print. p.253.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 255.

good work, and Rey, you are hot! Filthy Animals forever! [signed, Ashley Bird, Kalamazoo, MI].”¹¹⁵ Considering the example of the Filthy Animals, I argue that though Ashley Bird’s comment is an example of how professional wrestling possesses the ability to bring together an ethnically diverse collection of fans. It also possesses the ability to sexually exoticize its performers in such a way that further marginalizes oppressed groups in the U.S. Rey’s ability to be looked up to is directly connected to his ability to be “hot,” a hyper sexualized Hispanic from the streets. In this case, Mysterio’s cultural figure is built around stereotypes and does necessarily read as subversive performance for subaltern groups in the audience. This particular fan then contributes to Mysterio’s cultural figure with themes of body, ethnicity, and geography that converge to depict stereotypical constructions of the over-sexualized urban Latino.

In this way, we are able to see the marketing process creating audiences who help construct his cultural figure in myriad ways. While, according to Seiter, the WWE works to find strategies that appeal to the southern California urban Chicano youth for empowerment, the same strategies of appeal may limit Mysterio’s cultural figure in eyes of a white U.S. hegemonic audience (unfamiliar with tropes of southern California urban Chicano culture) that desire to be entertained by monolithic and stereotypical caricatures of marginalized Latino men. An insider/outsider audience then develops that is binary and built around knowledge of these tropes. Further, Mysterio’s figure is built through scopes of those who desire that his performance be a representation of ethnic pride and power against a theatrically oppressive system and that in which the convergence of

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p. 253 via Bird, Ashley. 2001. Letter to the Editor. *WCW Magazine*, May, p. 8.

hyper sexuality, Latina/o “otherness,” and urban Hip Hop culture can be exoticized, marketed, and consumed.

CONCLUSION

Fan communities and live audiences play an integral part in forming Rey Mysterio’s cultural figure, creating paratexts that are frequently mediated along with “primary” texts of Mysterio’s performance of dialogue and body that exists within the constructs of the WWE structure. Fans interpret Mysterio’s performance in myriad ways that work to create meanings of interpretation. The ability of audiences to work as “smarks” allow them to “play” with material within the WWE’s structure that at times work as an attempt to accept the theater on their own terms, critiquing both the institutional hierarchy of white monolithic masculine power in the performance as well as within the U.S. at large.

WWE Latina/o fans and audiences evoke surrogation as a way of rearticulating affiliation, expressing anxieties of collective history, and strengthening a representational presence of Latina/o wrestlers within the theater. The evocation of the late Eddie Guerrero is present within performative call and response at WWE live events as well as commemorative texts that exist on Mysterio’s body (utilized as heritage) and online fan communities that seek to honor both heritage and space within the structural confines of the WWE. This maintenance of memory is performed in a way that depends on Mysterio’s cultural figure to become a representation of Latina/os and latinidad as dictated by audience ordinance.

Fans' fascination and confusion with Rey Mysterio's performance of body via contact lenses and uniform reflect a disruption of binary constructs of race and nation. Mysterio's ability to fuse elements of bodily racial constructions as well as white reminiscent U.S. popular culture with that of Latina/o heritage present him as exotic entity that works to carve out space for Latina/os within hegemonic creations of nostalgia. This also works outside of the U.S. audience and possesses the ability to intrigue individuals' interpretations of "Americanness" at the global level.

The language of geography works as solidarity for certain online communities that support Mysterio as well an important aspect of individualized identity. The thematic 619 becomes more complex and varied as it travels through different mediations of paratext globally but also retains its symbolic significance via glocalization. Although there are instances of third space creation with the theme, global audiences reserve the right to create new meanings with little or no policing from fans in the U.S. or San Diego area.

Exploitation of Latino bodies is very much present in past performances of fandom in accordance with Rey Mysterio's theatrics. Marketing of the highly sexualized urban Latino body has proven successful and works within the configuration of his cultural figure as well as an attempt to appeal to urban Latino youths via the stylistic tropes of urban southern California Latina/o culture. This has proven to be both empowering and exploitative as determined by the interpretations of insider/outsider audiences, namely the "outsider" audiences who seek to be entertained by stereotypical depictions of highly sexualized stereotypes of Latino performance.

Conclusion

The case study of Rey Mysterio through the scope(s) of performative studies, critical race theory, imperialism, nationalism, globalization, reception studies, gender studies, and media studies offers nuanced ways of articulating professional wrestling scholarship. Often deemed and disregarded as low brow soap opera for a U.S. blue collar audience, academic perception of the professional wrestling fails to recognize its versatility as an evolving intersection for a number of academic disciplines. Professional wrestling's ability to feed off of, reproduce, and influence popular and political culture is too often neglected or taken for granted in the rhetoric of entertainment and media text.

In this way, the WWE offers ripe avenues to better understand representations of geography, space, and body within performance and socio-political U.S. culture. Further analysis is needed in articulating the relationship between performance of race and critical race theory, which point to myriad intentions and interpretations of performers and fans. It is in this way that "the cultural figure" of celebrity is warranted as it provides a comprehensive engagement in different aspects of language, representations, and symbolism that all form a locus to present marginalized performers in overlapping cultural spheres. It is important to recognize how the interpretations and representations within overlapping spheres often conflict to complicate and destabilize imperialist sentiment and nationalized "common sense" ideology; especially in regard to the codification of racialized bodies. In the case study of Rey Mysterio, it was these very conflicts that provided the most productive research for this thesis.

The terms “Latino/a” and “popular culture” as well as their relationship toward one another point to the problematic ways in which cultural studies, at times, can generalize and define groups into monolithic criteria. Further work should be implemented to complicate and expand on the fluidity of each term, different experiences, diasporas, and identities that work to represent them; as well as how attaching static understandings of both “Latino/a” and “popular culture” can work to strengthen white supremacist ideology.

Future analysis of social protest theater within the parameters of U.S. professional wrestling should consider the changing sociopolitical climate in WWE performances that, in many ways, deviates from the traditional superiority of nationalized, white, monolithic masculinity. Recent developments have placed the white villainous group *The Real Americans* as a tea-party-esque coalition that garners significant heckling and boos from the audience; utilizing themes of paranoia toward Mexican immigration, exaggerated nationalistic dialogue, and a desire to return *America* back to its “superior and Constitutional” moral origins. Their “buzz” has caught the attention of conservative political commentators Glen Beck and Alex Jones, who oppose the WWE’s direction of performance as demeaning to their causes.

In addition, it is worth noting that Rey Mysterio has recently been mobilized as an adversary of the Real Americans, marking new ways in which depictions of ethnicity and race are being implemented in WWE narrative as well as the questioning of U.S. “common sense” ideals. The WWE’s ability to encourage audience members to collectively support these sensational and racialized/nationalized storylines is worth

consideration when exploring social protest theater, audience engagement, and popular discourse within the U.S.

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The Patricia & Carmine De Vivi Collection, 2013
2012.001.101
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Ostotitlan or La parota, Guerrero, Mexico
H: 36"
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