Wrestling Luchadoras and Female Masculinities

La Comandante

Martha Villalobos

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

La Comandante

The image above by Grobet from 2009, shows La Comandante still in her outfit as La Nazi. She looks proud and content standing in front of a wall in which a painting of El Santo, updated with a mobile in his hand, can be seen. As she points at him she makes a direct reference to his legacy and possibly positions herself as an heir. Moreover, by taking on the same pose as El Santo on the wall, she allows both their bodies to be compared: they have almost the same height and are similarly built. In a conversation with me, La Comandante made clear that she considers her body to be ‘already almost like one of a man’, and if she would have kept on going to the gym, to build her musc-les with weights, she ‘would be totally a man’. It was her mother’s comment ‘You aren’t a woman anymore, you are a man’ (Translation from Spanish: ‘Tú ya no eres una mujer, eres un hombre’) that kept her from bodybuilding more. La Comandante’s mother considered her daughter’s training, which caused visible changes in her appearance, as endangering of her femininity. She could not envision her daught-ers’ gender equivocation as a possible mode of identifica-tion. It seems however, that La Comandante did not turn away from her own masculinity but rather decided not to pursue it far enough, to become “totally a man”. Far from being an imitation of maleness’, Halberstam claims, ‘female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity’. The example of La Comandante exemplifies how much a person’s physiognomy declares her or him to fail masculinity or femininity. There are signs of masculinity, among them the body’s appearance, which obviously bespeak masculinity. These signs can also be achieved through training, as in the case of La Coman-dante, or by taking chemical substances such as hormo-nes, anabolic steroids and potency pills, changing diet or hygiene, undergoing surgery, altering style or fashion, re-peating poses and gestures, and other means employed by female-, male-, and trans-gender-born people. As such, it is impossible to reduce certain signs—for example, a built physique, power and strength—only to male-born people.

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

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

According to her words, Villalobos considered being lesbi-an a deficiency, even though she regards being aghast at homosexuality as stupid. Thirteen years later, however, in 2005, at the Primer Festival Lésbico de la Ciudad de Mé-xico (First Lesbian Festival of Mexico City), she supported the campaign Contra la violencia entre mujeres (Against Violence Between Women). On September 23, 2009, she announced in the magazine TV y Novelas, that her partner was a woman. Together they raise two boys from former relationships. In the interview she clarified: ‘I don’t have a reason to hide my nature, but I’m not going to tell it to eve-ryone. Currently, I am happy, very happy, I have my own life with my partner and my two children.’

Halberstam suggests that the ‘widespread indifference to [and avoidance of] female masculinity […] has sustained the complex social structures that pair masculinity with male-ness, power and dominance.’ This is why I consider it to be important to discuss the different masculinities—and here I position La Comandaten and Villalobos as examples—that have the potential to destabilize this pairing, and to make it clear that masculinity is constructed by female- and trans-gender—as much as by male-born people.

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