

UNPINNING GENDER: *EXÓTICO* INTERVENTIONS IN GENDER  
PERFORMATIVITY IN MEXICAN *LUCHA LIBRE* WRESTLING

AN ABSTRACT

SUBMITTED ON THE SECOND DAY OF JUNE 2023

TO THE ROGER THAYER STONE CENTER FOR LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

OF TULANE UNIVERSITY

FOR THE DEGREE

OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY



CATHERINE PRECHTEL

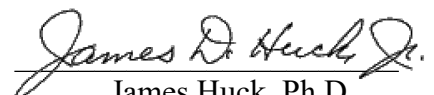
APPROVED:



Mimi Schippers, Ph.D.  
Director



Marilyn Miller, Ph.D.



James Huck, Ph.D.



## ABSTRACT

As Mexican *lucha libre* wrestlers who are most easily recognized for their dramatic stylizations and their feats of strength and grace, *exóticos* defy convention and categorization even as they constitute their own genre of wrestling. While the ‘*exótico*’ category typically includes *luchadores* who identify as gay men, the category itself is not solely based on gender identity or sexual orientation, but rather on a common mode of *exótico* performance. This study seeks to understand how *exóticos* engage with and contest heteronormative hierarchies and structures of hegemonic gender relations that would inscribe men who perform femininity and stereotypes of homosexuality in positions of inferiority. By examining *exóticos*’ experiences with becoming *exóticos*, their performative practices, how they interact with other *exóticos* and other *luchadores* (“wrestlers”), as well as how they move through public and activist spaces, this dissertation considers both the ways that *exóticos* disrupt heteronormativity and the ways in which their practices may reinscribe it, especially with regard to trans *exóticas*. Drawing on data from 16 semi-structured interviews, this dissertation documents and amplifies the experiences and perspectives of *exótico* wrestlers both as a subculture and as a category of wrestlers with growing popularity. By connecting queer theory, gender and sexuality studies, and performance studies, this research aims to contribute to the growing discussions of gender performativity within *exótico* wrestling and the broader cultural implications of *exóticos*’ performances on attitudes towards *lucha libre*, *exóticos*, queer identities, and LGBTTTI activist movements.

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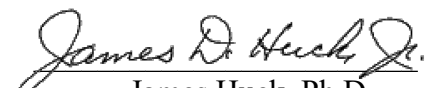


CATHERINE PRECHTEL

APPROVED:

  
Mimi Schippers, Ph.D.  
Director

  
Marilyn Miller, Ph.D.

  
James Huck, Ph.D.

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## PREFACE: ENCOUNTERS WITH *LUCHA LIBRE* WRESTLING

Cassandro el Exótico stretches his arms out wide, pulling his royal purple train behind him as he crosses the platform in front of the *lucha libre* ring. Bouncing his hips to the music, he raises his arms in the air and claps along to the beat, stoking the crowd's excitement. His large championship belt sits on his waist, swinging along with his movements. While his purple and gold coat is buttoned across the front and covers his arms, he sports flesh-colored nylon tights on his legs, which glimmer in the spotlights. Gold and purple knee pads tie the outfit together, contrasting with his white laced wrestling boots. He removes his coat to reveal a dark bodysuit with a plunging neckline decorated with metallic gold that matches the long cuffs that protect his forearms. Cassandro dances flirtatiously and joyously. His bold eyeshadow draws focus to his eyes, and his light brown hair is styled away from his face, ensuring that the public can see his expressions as he works the crowd.

The camera of this *Lucha VaVOOM* video cuts to another scene featuring Cassandro and his opponent, who wears all black and a mask. The opponent holds Cassandro's hand as Cassandro jumps up into the corner of the ring, helping Cassandro balance as he sashays across the cords. In another shot, Cassandro's new opponent picks him up around the waist and inverts him. For a moment, Cassandro appears to be helpless with his legs trapped by his opponent as he is lifted into the air. At the last moment, Cassandro grabs the back of his opponent's neck and uses his body weight to launch forward, pulling his opponent with him and sending him headfirst onto the floor. Cassandro

springs to his feet and throws back his head in triumph before beginning to dance again.<sup>1</sup> The video cuts to Cassandra triumphantly dancing before it cuts again to a view of him launching himself from the balcony of the stadium towards the audience, easily clearing ten feet as he falls. Cassandra is known for these stunts, and deftly maneuvers his short, athletic frame as he demonstrates his technical, acrobatic prowess.



Figure 1. Lucha VaVOOM. Still of Cassandra from the video “Lucha VaVOOM Fighter: Cassandra!”

In a later shot, he grabs his unmasked opponent on both sides of his face and kisses him on the mouth.<sup>2</sup> His opponent raises his fists in the air and begins flailing his limbs and stomping his feet, bouncing left to right in an almost comical tantrum. When Cassandra finishes the kiss, he throws his opponent to the ground and raises his arms in triumph. This sequence is interspersed with other clips of him launching his opponents over his head, delivering kicks with the full force of his body to their chests, and other more overtly sexual

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<sup>1</sup> See Figure 1.

<sup>2</sup> See Figure 2.

moves, such as when he sits on his opponent's face while holding his opponent's ankles over his head.



Figure 2. Lucha VaVOOM. Still of Cassandro kissing his opponent in the video “Lucha VaVOOM Fighter: Cassandro!”

The quick changes of the video echo the rapid chaos of *lucha libre* matches. Victors change from one moment to the next, and while some moves appear to be choreographed, others appear to be improvised, or even accidental. Yet what is most striking about this video is the exuberance that Cassandro projects, and his unabashedly flirtatious behavior with the audience and his opponents. In a sport that is supposedly dominated by displays of masculine strength and aggression, Cassandro's proud mixture of elegance, glamor, and agility, which could traditionally connote femininity, merge with his performances of aggression, strength, and risk-taking, which supposedly align with stereotypes of masculinity. But Cassandro seamlessly embodies both ranges of stereotypically masculine and feminine behaviors, effortlessly bouncing between, around, and even through the categories that are traditionally considered complementary opposites. Through his

interactions that generate an erotic charge with his opponents, such as kissing them, flirting, or even placing them into sexually suggestive pins,<sup>3</sup> Cassandro makes it clear that he is not only performing elements of femininity: he is also performing homosexuality.



Figure 3. Lucha VaVOOM. Still of Cassandro placing his opponent in a hold in the video “Lucha VaVOOM Fighter: Cassandro!”

### Approaching the Research

Though I lived in León, Guanajuato, Mexico for two years, I never attended a *lucha libre* event. I had seen the brightly colored flyers for *lucha libre* matches scattered around bus stops, and I had purchased souvenirs with images of luchadores. I had even watched a few films featuring El Santo, who was one of the most iconic wrestlers in Mexican *lucha libre* history. Yet none of my friends ever expressed interest in attending any *lucha libre* events with me. Though they never verbalized this, some of my friends hinted that attending a *lucha libre* event would be tacky or boring. Some even compared *lucha libre*

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<sup>3</sup> See Figure 3.



to the U.S.-based World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. (WWE), both in terms of the content of the sport, as well as the negative stereotypes and connotations of lower-class taste.

While I was intrigued by the visual presence of *lucha libre* in Mexican popular culture, I didn't pursue *lucha libre* any further. Occasionally, headlines would catch my eye, such as when El Hijo del Perro Aguayo died at the age of 35 in 2015 from injuries sustained during a *lucha libre* event. His death emphasized the danger and serious nature of *lucha libre*, despite accusations or jokes that *lucha libre* is 'fake.'

It wasn't until I attended an event at Tulane University in 2019 that this dissertation truly began. Cassandro el Exótico,<sup>4</sup> 'The Liberace of *Lucha Libre*,' visited campus to present on his experiences as a luchador *exótico*, his advocacy for queer rights, and the premiere of the documentary *Cassandro, the Exótico!* directed by Marie Losier. I was floored, not only by the extravagant costumes and videos of his wrestling that Cassandro shared with the audience, but also by my complete ignorance of the *exótico* category. I had no clue that there was an entire genre of wrestlers who could perform as gay characters, let alone a category with such an extensive history and a platform that has allowed *exóticos* like Cassandro to publicly advocate for queer rights.

As this study began to unfold, the *exóticos* I spoke with frequently asked how my project got its start. Perhaps they felt that they were such a niche category that they were surprised a *gringa* would take interest. Some seemed surprised that I even knew that *lucha libre* existed. Many were delighted that a foreign researcher wanted to speak to them, and several shared that they hoped their participation in this study would create greater international awareness of the *exótico* category, their impact, and their advocacy.

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<sup>4</sup> Also known as Saúl Armendáriz.

Others were more suspicious, perhaps even wary of a stranger asking to interview them without the immediate promise of publicity. My position as a foreigner was compounded by my existence outside of the world of *lucha libre*; I had few connections to begin with, and little credibility to assure them that I was, in fact, serious about my interest in speaking with them. Further, as a White, middle-class, non-Mexican researcher and a student from the United States, I knew that my position as an academic from the Global North loomed over my shoulder.

How could I accurately and fairly conduct, interpret, and represent this research without reinforcing currents of academic imperialism or stereotypes? As someone who comes from ‘outside’ the categories of national identity, race, ethnicity, and class shared by many of the *exóticos*, I knew that I would constantly need to interrogate my own positionality in relation to this research. Yet the ethnographer Katie Acosta (2013) explains that while the insider/outsider debates are important, they also fail to account for the complexity of these statuses and the countless similarities and differences that we might share with the communities with which we interact (10). The positions of insider and outsider are in constant states of negotiation, and as Acosta argues, “we are often insiders and outsiders simultaneously” (10). In a globalized context characterized by frequent cultural exchanges between Mexico and the United States, these borders grow even blurrier. Yet I also recognize that I could never fully comprehend the lived experiences of *exóticos*, whether as professional athletes, as queer Mexicans, or even on the level of their racialized, socioeconomic, and national identities. For this reason, I have worked to make this dissertation as faithful an expression of their perspectives as possible to ensure that I don’t speak over the *exóticos*, but rather in dialogue with them.

I have aimed to consistently recognize and account for my positionality as a researcher inserting myself into *exóticos*' lives and acknowledge the dynamics of collecting such intimate data as what *exóticos* shared with me. While my research is in many ways extractive because I have traveled to Mexico to collect data for the completion of my degree in the United States, I have also worked to ensure that this research is based on collaboration. My goal has been to cultivate authentic working relationships with *exóticos* to ensure that whether through financial compensation, publicity in both academic publications and my personal blog, or professional networking, our interactions have been as useful for them as they have been for me. Following the methods of Acosta, I have also aimed to treat the participants in this study as experts and collaborators, making it a coproduction of knowledge (10). This includes holding follow-up interviews with *exóticos*, asking for clarifications, sending them brief passages for their input and approval, and asking them to explore some of the primary themes that emerged from the interview data.

With these considerations in mind, my goal for this research has been to forefront *exóticos*' voices throughout my investigation, and respectfully engage with them throughout the analysis. I do not share the *exóticos*' identities as Mexican *lucha libre* wrestlers, or their experiences with homophobic and transphobic discrimination, but as a woman who performs femininity, I understand the implications of performing femininity in a society that privileges masculinity. I admire the *exóticos* who skillfully blend their beauty, delicacy, strength, and power, defying stereotypes of feminine weakness and victimization. I look to them as more than just participants: they are experts in gender performance whose collaborations have made this investigation possible, and whose experiences I intend to honor throughout this dissertation.

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Accessed 22 Apr. 2023.

## FRAMING THE RESEARCH

This dissertation explores the potentials of *exótico* performances, their relationships with models of gender and sexuality, their navigation of exclusionary spaces and institutionalized discrimination, and how they understand their cultural impact. Though the *exótico* category brims with creativity and the potential to destabilize cultural models of gender and sexuality, the same *exótico* category proves difficult to define. Encompassing wrestlers of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, the *exótico* category and *lucha exótica* (“*exótico* wrestling”) defy any single categorization, though *exóticos* tend to share an enjoyment of openly defying heteronormativity and its embedded gender norms. While the category of ‘*exótico*’ typically includes *luchadores* who identify as gay men, the category itself is not solely based on gender identity or sexual orientation, but rather on a common mode of *exótico* performance.

Through their performances, *exóticos* frequently weave through and blend understandings of femininity and masculinity, demonstrating their potential as creative gender performers. *Exóticos* therefore present a unique challenge to traditional gendered scripts in Mexican wrestling, as well as understandings of gender and sexuality in the broader public sphere. By examining *exóticos*’ experiences with becoming *exóticos*, how they interact with other *exóticos* and other *luchadores* (“wrestlers”), as well as how they move through public and activist spaces, I seek to understand how *exóticos* interact with and disrupt hierarchies and structures of domination that would inscribe men who perform effeminacy and stereotypes of homosexuality in positions of inferiority.

These analyses are made possible not only by my ethnographic data primarily based on semi-structured interviews, but also by the broad influence of *lucha libre* on Mexican popular culture, which has been expressed through film, visual and performing arts, and sports, in addition to discourses of gender and sexuality, *mexicanidad* (“Mexicanness”), nationalism, class, race, and modernity. The literature on *lucha libre* has therefore been diverse, but not without its limits. Several authors have examined *lucha libre* and its connection to depictions of *mexicanidad* through national cinema (Dalton 2018; Rauber Rodríguez 2020; Rubenstein 2003), many have analyzed *lucha libre* as a form of wrestling performance (Levi 2016; Hoechtl 2016; Möbius 2007), others have considered its connections to *mexicanidad* and Mexican popular culture (Lieberman 2009; Levi 2008; Gabara 2010; Santana 2016), and a handful have considered the work that *exóticos* have done to challenge gender roles within *lucha libre* (Levi 1998; Cavazos Torres 2016; Vargas Cervantes 2019; Möbius 2007; Huth 2012; Rojo de la Vega Guinea 2018; Hoechtl 2015 and 2016; Bastida Aguilar and Cruz Ortega 2017; Pereda and Murrieta-Flores 2011).

Considering these several promising leads within the field of *lucha libre*, there is both a wealth of information about the general topic of *lucha libre*, and significant room for the expansion of debates specifically focused on *exótico* performativity and subjectivities. Most of the literature on *exótico* experiences and performances centers on a select few *exóticos*; for example, Tabea Huth’s 2012 work focuses explicitly on the experiences of the *exótico* Ruby Gardenia, while Nina Hoechtl’s 2015 study focuses on Polvo de Estrellas’s story. The aforementioned works by Janina Möbius, Heather Levi, Susana Vargas Cervantes, Ximena Rojo de la Vega Guinea, Leonardo Bastida Aguilar and Ariel Cruz Ortega, and Javier Pereda and Patricia Murrieta-Flores focus on histories and

analyses of the *exótico* category as a whole. Few authors (if any) have conducted broader ethnographic studies. My research therefore dialogues with these aforementioned authors, using my interview data to engage with their theories and illustrate the points that many of them make, while further complicating the conversations about how *exóticos* intervene in understandings of gender and sexuality. This research seeks to create a convergence of these analyses, in which *exóticos* are the focus (rather than an anecdote) in the study of gender and sexuality. By connecting queer theory, gender and sexuality studies, and performance studies to the study of *exóticos* and *lucha libre*, this research aims to facilitate rich conversations about the transformative potential of *exótico* wrestlers' performances.

### **Literature Review**

While the data for my investigation ultimately centers questions of gender and sexuality, these concepts must be considered through their intersections with experiences of racialization, class inequality, and nationalism, as well as how they have historically been presented and debated both within Mexico and the United States. These categories converge within the realm of professional wrestling and subsequently through scholarly analyses of *lucha libre*. This therefore necessitates a broad review of literature to showcase the complexities of these intersecting forces and to provide the necessary context for understanding how *exóticos* move through the world of *lucha libre*. The following literature review therefore synthesizes several theoretical concepts and academic debates to build the foundation for exploring and understanding *exótico* performance.

*Queer Theory, Gender Performativity, and Hegemonic Gender Relations*

This investigation seeks to bridge the current gap in academic literature on *exóticos* by applying a gender and sexuality studies lens to current sociological and historical information on *lucha libre*. Fernando Cavazos Torres (2016), Ximena Rojo de la Vega (2018), Janina Möbius (2007), and Heather Levi (1997; 2008) have explored the development of *lucha libre* and the emergence of *exóticos*, charting the development of *exótico* personalities and how *exóticos* have related to the world of *lucha libre*. However, there have been few theoretical analyses dedicated solely to *exóticos*. My research will therefore contribute to the incipient theoretical conversations concerning *exótico* performances.

To do so, this investigation relies on the concept of gender performativity as articulated by Judith Butler (1990). As a social construction, gender is performatively repeated, produced, and conceptualized within a hierarchical binary system in which the categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are understood as a universal, natural, and discrete pair (*Gender Trouble* 34; 190). The binary categorization of gender posits that the only valid possibilities are ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ and the corresponding performances of these gender categories must cleanly abide by the established, complementary structure. Thus, ‘masculinities’ and ‘femininities’ are understood as distinct categories with no overlap or flexibility. Importantly, while these categories of gender are sustained through performative acts, gender is still a potent system that has tangible ramifications and shapes social interactions at multiple levels of society (Ridgeway 146). Though gender performativity allows for individuals to exercise their agency and create difference through their performances that might diverge from the norm, these performances still carry



consequences because of the institutionalization of gender norms (Moreno and Torres Cruz 248).

Within the systems of heteronormativity (Berlant and Warner 1998) and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980), heterosexuality is established and normalized, while non-heterosexual desires or identities are interpreted and treated as dangerous deviations. This results in the ranking of heterosexuality above all other sexualities, creating a system of heterosexual hegemony in which masculinity occupies a position of dominance over femininity. Though masculinity is performative, and does not exclusively belong to men, the concept of masculinity connotes power, legitimacy, privilege, and control over women (Halberstam 2). R.W. Connell (1995) has described this as hegemonic masculinity, which functions within the system of hegemonic gender relations. Following several authors' engagements with the concept, the basic tenets of the model remain: the categories of men and women are constructed as "naturally different, complementary, and hierarchical," with heterosexuality sanctioned as the norm, establishing masculinity and heterosexuality as superior, and deeming femininity and homosexuality (as well as other alternative sexualities), as inferior (Messerschmidt 54).

Hegemonic masculinities do not simply consist of fixed masculine traits or stable character types; rather, they are fluid, can be adapted, and can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting, because masculinities "are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action" (Connell and Messerschmidt 854; 836). Broadly, however, traits such as physical strength, the use of violence, and authority, are typically categorized as 'masculine,' while femininity is imagined to consist of the polar opposite, through traits such as weakness, passivity, compliance, and physical vulnerability

(Schippers “Recovering” 91). This means that performances of hegemonic masculinities are situational, contextual, and flexible, but as configurations of practice they ultimately depend on social interactions to reinforce unequal gender relations. Hegemonic gender relations are thus sustained through the repeated performances of the complementary nature of the gender binary, meaning that masculinities are not only imagined in opposition to femininities (Connell and Messerschmidt 848), but also legitimize the ascendancy of men over women, making the inequality implicit in this system appear to be both natural and correct (Schippers “Recovering” 91).

While the aforementioned authors describe the dynamics of gender complementarity and the subsequent hierarchies that these reinforce, that does not prevent individuals from disturbing or diverging from normative performances of gender. As Mimi Schippers explains, individuals can engage in gender maneuvering, which is a kind of interaction in which “one or more people manipulate their own gender performance or manipulate the meaning of their own or others’ gender performances in order to establish, disrupt, or change the relationship between and among masculinities and femininities” (*Rockin’* xiii). This study sought to understand whether and how *exóticos* engage in these strategies, and as the data will show, they strategically manipulate their performances depending on their context to contest hierarchies of masculinities and femininities. These deviations are not without consequence, however, and as the analysis will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, *exóticos* have also developed strategies for responding to the consequences of their gender nonconformity.

*The Limitations of U.S. Queer Theory in Latin American and Mexican Contexts*

Considering that the models of hegemonic masculinity, gender performativity, and the gender binary cited in this investigation have been conceptualized from within the Global North, this investigation must also incorporate theorizations of gender and sexuality with a focus on Mexican cultures and/or produced from within Mexico. Without culturally or regionally specific frameworks, the investigation runs the risk of uncritically transposing models that obscure broader social inequalities and histories of academic imperialism. Several theorists such as Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (2011) and Michael Hames-García (2011) have argued that U.S.-based queer theory centers a White (and often middle-class) subject in its formulations, and thus reinforces the marginalization and tokenization of theorists of color (Hames-García 26). When these models are casually applied to the Latin American or Mexican context, this also obscures the histories of colonialism, Eurocentrism, and racism while reinforcing a European or Western perspective (Hames-García 42). Therefore, in the Mexican context, an application of U.S.-based queer theory requires not only a reckoning with its colonial roots, but also a decolonial response that centers practices of resistance from Latin America.

Yet during my time as a researcher, student, and collaborator within Mexican and international gender studies groups, I have found that many of my peers teach, discuss, and cite the same theorists as those within the United States and mainstream academia of the Global North, ranging from Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir to Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. This points not only to the hegemony of Global North academia, but also to the international nature of sociological studies of gender and sexuality and queer theory. This is not to say that there are no authors who have written outside of the international academy, but rather that ‘mainstream’ authors are regarded as the intellectual basis which

all authors are expected to acknowledge. As César Torres Cruz and Hortensia Moreno Esparza from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México explain, even within the world of activism, in which new queer/*cuir* theories and practices are articulated outside of academia, these outsider voices often do not participate in academic discourses (“Sociología” 5). Such creativity certainly exists, but it is rarely included within mainstream academia. I have therefore sought Mexican sources to explain the gender and sexual phenomena within this study, aiming to acknowledge the conversations that have shaped my personal academic journey, while contextualizing this study within academic conversations occurring within Mexico.

Similarly, while many Latin American authors have written about gender and sexuality, this does not automatically render them applicable to the Mexican context. In the same way that treating North American models as universal erases the complexities of other cultures, imagining that all Latin American cultures contain the same qualities promotes the stereotype of a monolithic ‘Latin American’ or ‘Latino’ culture. Lionel Cantú argues that researchers must avoid the ‘one size fits all’ approach to Latin American models of gender and sexuality and must reject overly broad cultural models (149). He explains that an uncritically formulated model of an imagined ‘Latino’ culture or a ‘Latino masculinity’ not only imagines an exotic ‘Other,’ but also reifies difference while reinforcing U.S. cultural hegemony (149). It is crucial, then, to recognize and explore differences among Latino as well as among Mexican men, because failing to do so upholds the notion of essentialized culture and universal gender systems.

In his synthesis of Mexican LGBTTTI<sup>5</sup> movements, Juan Carlos Rocha Osornio argues that U.S. queer theory cannot be copied and pasted into the Mexican context, but instead must be constructed as a bridge that helps forge ties of cooperation to be able to better understand the lived realities of people in both Mexico and the United States (266). For example, while Chapter 2 of this dissertation engages with Carlos Decena's (2008) discussion of tacit subjects, which he developed based on the experiences of Dominican men living in New York City, this does not inherently represent the experiences of men living in Mexico. To bridge what gaps may exist between describing Dominican and Mexican men's experiences, without discarding any similarities, I engage with other Mexican authors and draw from my data to develop a richer understanding of the concept.

Learning to recognize the complexities of a specific cultural context, such as that of Mexican *exótico* wrestlers, and expanding different models and theoretical frameworks can help enrich the analysis of this research while forcing the interrogation of any single narrative or perspective. This is facilitated by employing Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality to understand the varying impacts of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and even deeper, incorporating the consideration of how nationality, class, geography, and immigration create intersecting vectors of oppression that Mexican *exóticos* may face. Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba argues that queer theory can be applied in conjunction with intersectionality to a Latin American context as a queer methodology, "in which sexuality and gender expressions cannot be detached from economic determinants; religious and legal constraints; racial, class, and nationality exclusions; or political conjunctures" (*Translating* 5). This method enables a political process in which

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<sup>5</sup> Lesbiana, Gay, Transexual, Transgénero, Travesti, Intersexual.

the margins, the exclusions, and oppressions of alternative bodies are recognized, allowing for a greater understanding of the intersecting forms of oppression experienced in Mexico (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba *Translating* 5). This can help make the specific struggles that *exóticos* face in terms of gender, sexuality, race, class, etc., familiar and understandable without essentializing them as part of ‘Mexican culture’ or framing them as emblematic of difference, instead showing the commonality of their struggles across different cultural contexts.

Even the application of the term ‘queer’ to Latin American contexts becomes problematic when the term ‘queer’ holds little linguistic or cultural purchase in Spanish-speaking Latin America. Authors such as Amy Kaminsky have proposed the verb ‘*encuirar*,’ which phonetically includes part of the term ‘queer,’ while also resonating with the verb *encuerar*, (“to undress”) (879). Other authors, such as César Torres Cruz and Hortensia Moreno (2021) use the term *cuir*, which maintains the original sound of the English term, while making it linguistically intelligible for Spanish speakers, but it has not necessarily replaced the use of the term ‘queer’ (Fiol-Matta 219). As Susana Vargas Cervantes argues, the terms ‘queer’ and ‘*cuir*,’ simply do not hold the same cultural meaning (“Saliendo” 165); instead, she opts for using Mexican terms such as ‘*maricón*,’ ‘*marica*,’ ‘*puto*,’ and ‘*joto*,’ all of which describe people with ‘abnormal’ sexual preferences, especially effeminate men who belong to the popular classes (“Saliendo” 159). Importantly, as Vargas Cervantes argues, these terms also intersect with class and race within Mexico, as the term ‘gay’ generally describes men with lighter complexions and higher social mobility (Ibid.).

Ultimately, in the writing of this dissertation, I attempt to echo the terminology used by the interview participants, while considering the intent behind choosing the terms they use to describe themselves. This study therefore seeks to understand how *exóticos* may contradict and/or evidence many of these same theoretical concepts, and how they interact with the idea of a universal model of gender and sexuality. It also provides examples of how *exóticos* perform gender and engage with stereotypes of homosexuality on interpersonal and institutional levels, opening a discussion to how *exóticos'* performances engage with discriminatory structures.

### *Reckoning with Prior Models*

While I seek to bridge queer theory from the U.S. and broader Latin American countries with works centered specifically on Mexican understandings of gender and sexuality, this requires an engagement with how these categories have historically been understood and performed in the Mexican context. However, much of the literature on Mexican understandings of gender and sexuality, and especially in relation to masculinity, asserts a binary framework of masculine-feminine. Reifying a binary understanding of gender and sexuality asserts a simplistic understanding of how gender and sexual systems function, without acknowledging the agency of individuals to challenge said systems. At the same time, *exóticos* espouse many of these models and concepts to explain their lived experiences. The theoretical work of this dissertation therefore requires a critical interrogation of how and why *exóticos* engage with certain models, even if said models may appear at first glance to be limiting.

In her frequently cited 1973 article, Evelyn Stevens describes the phenomena of *machismo* and *marianismo*, explaining that the Latin American *macho* is the center of society and of the family (62). The *macho* seeks control and is prepared and entitled to act violently and aggressively towards other men, and sexually aggressive towards women (Stevens 59). Even though Stevens argues that the roots of *machismo* trace back to the influence of the Mediterranean countries of Spain and Italy, she insists that *machismo* flourishes in the regions of Latin America with the greatest mixture between European, Indigenous and African populations, making Mexico a prime example (58). Indigenous communities with relatively little European contact, she argues, have fewer traits of *machismo* (Stevens 58). Thus, she frames *machismo* as a uniquely Latin American phenomenon born of the mixture of cultures via colonialism.

Though this model has gained broad social traction, several authors such as Benjamin Cowan (2017) have refuted Stevens' model for its over-generalized, racially pathologizing interpretation of Latin American masculinities and the phenomenon of *machismo*. Yet many authors have noted the discursive resonance of *machismo* within Mexican culture, as well as how it has been strongly associated with Mexican masculinities. In his ethnography *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*, which explores the question of Mexican masculinities and their evolution across time and place, Matthew Gutmann observes that "the words macho and machismo have become a form of calumny, shorthand terms in social science and journalistic writing for labeling a host of negative male characteristics in cultures around the world" (26). Gutmann explains that "stereotypes about machismo are critical ingredients in the symbolic capital used by ordinary Mexicans," and "even if verbally denigrated by many, machismo is widely



regarded in Mexico as constituting part of the national patrimony in much the same way as the country's oil deposits are considered a source of national if not necessarily individual self-identity. In this manner machismo has become part of the more general political economy of cultural values in Mexico" (Gutmann 27). Thus, *machismo* is widely recognized as part of the cultural heritage of Mexico, even though many (if not most) people do not approve of *machismo* or practice it in their everyday lives. The prevalence of the *machismo* model in explaining gender relations, regardless of its accuracy, reverberates within other social frameworks in studies of Mexican culture. Even in discussions with *exóticos* about gender relations and homophobia, many cited *machismo* as a factor that drove inequality and discrimination.

Like the concept of *machismo-marianismo*, many of the models of gender and sexuality that have been applied to the Latin American context reflect the influence of North American and Eurocentric academic perspectives. Without entirely discarding these models, this investigation seeks to formulate a response to them, exploiting theoretical weaknesses and biases while pointing to scholarship from the region that contests these frameworks. Therefore, a crucial facet of this investigation is a deeper exploration of the conversations surrounding gender and sexuality emerging from Mexico, facilitated by theoretical and ethnographic works published by authors within the Mexican context.

While the model of machismo presents the danger of over-generalizations, another model of gender and sexuality that is commonly cited in studies of Mexico is the concept of *activo-pasivo*, or 'active-passive.' The Mexican author Octavio Paz's controversial discussions of gender and sexuality, especially his descriptions of a binary of active-passive, penetrator-penetrated, *chingón-chingada* ("fucker-fucked"), have gained as much

criticism as they have traction. Octavio Paz argued that the Mexican psyche is shaped by the sexual violence of colonization, in which the Indigenous mother (specifically ‘La Chingada,’ or ‘La Malinche’), was raped by the Spanish conquistadores, resulting in the Mexican attitude of ‘*chingar o ser chingado*,’ of being the aggressor or being the victim, an attitude that divides society into the weak and the strong (Paz 101-102). The verb ‘*chingar*’ itself is described as a masculine verb of violence, describing the *macho*’s penetration of the passive other, the feminine *chingada*. While the masculine ‘*macho*,’ is the ‘*Gran Chingón*,’ (“Big Fucker”) who embodies aggression, women represent passivity (Paz 105-110). The feminization of passivity, then, reinforces the active-passive model and the feminization of men who are anally receptive.

This focus on the penetrated-penetrator nature of the *activo-pasivo* model reinforces the validation of the masculine and the stigmatization of femininity and passivity among men. Yet the stigmatization does not apply to all men who have sex with men; rather it is applied to those who take on the ‘feminine’ role. Tomás Almaguer explains this as the active-passive model, arguing that rather than affixing the label of ‘homosexual’ to all men who have sex with men, the label of ‘homosexual’ is only applied to the *pasivo*, or ‘anal-passive/receptive’ partners, and “it is primarily the anal-passive individual (the *cochón* or *pasivo*) who is stigmatized for playing the subservient, feminine role” (78). This unequal application of stigma reinforces the stereotype of the effeminate homosexual man, who is construed as antithetical to the performance of a hegemonic form of masculinity.

However, this model of *activo-pasivo* is not universally accepted. In a roundtable discussion with Carlos Decena, Héctor Carrillo, and Tomás Almaguer, Salvador Vidal-Ortiz discusses the emergence of the *activo-pasivo* model and its applications (2010).

Explaining Octavio Paz's framework, Vidal-Ortiz notes that the "circum-Mediterranean constructions of male honor and female shame provide the foundational gender binary that structures and ignites hierarchical heterosexual and homosexual relationships in Mexico" (254). While Vidal-Ortiz et al. agree that this model may serve as a starting point for conversations, and they acknowledge its use as a relevant interpretation of male sexualities and homosexualities, they suggest that we regard *activo-pasivo* as one among many diverse options for understanding contemporary Latino sexual and homosexual worlds (254). Pulling back from the application of the *activo-pasivo* model as a universal model of masculine homosexualities in Mexico, then, these authors argue that it may be part of a diverse array of models for interpreting, practicing, and understanding Mexican systems of gender and sexuality.

Importantly, the models of *activo-pasivo*, masculine-feminine, and even *machismo-marianismo*, all draw from binary understandings of gender and sexual interactions. While the aforementioned authors certainly question the extent to which these models hold true in everyday interactions, these binary models continue to shape public discourse and common understandings of Mexican culture, especially from the North American perspective. Though the interview data gathered during this study does not explicitly focus on the concepts of *machismo-marianismo* or *activo-pasivo*, these debates heavily shape academic discussions of masculinity and femininity, as well as the categorization of homosexual relations within Mexico and Latin America. Rather, *exóticos* demonstrate how they performatively destabilize these categories and binary organizations of masculinity and femininity.

*Masculinity, Femininity, and the Mexican Nation*

Before Octavio Paz's theorizations of the Mexican psyche heavily shaped the conversations surrounding gender, sexuality, and Mexican identity, an event that took place called the *Baile de los 41* ("Dance of the 41"), shaped public discourses about homosexuality. In 1901 when Mexico City Police raided a party where wealthy, effeminate, cross-dressing men and other queer individuals were celebrating, the ensuing media uproar suddenly cast a spotlight on the emerging recognition of the concept of 'homosexuality' (Irwin et al. 3). In fact, due to the public scandal and the sudden discussion of the category of 'homosexuality,' cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis argues that this event marked the 'invention' of homosexuality in Mexico (164). The arrested men, many of whom would have been classified as 'dandies,' were largely from the Mexican upper classes, which ultimately led to a conflation of dandyism, wealth, and bourgeois values with male femininity (Irwin et al. 12). This scandal helped stoke the incipient revolutionary inclinations and class tensions which would emerge in the Mexican Revolution several years later. It simultaneously fueled the mockery and disdain for the stereotype of the effeminate homosexual man, who represented gender and sexual deviancy, as well as the decadence of the Mexican elite, provoking anxieties concerning the degeneration of the national culture itself (Irwin et al. 12). As subsequent chapters will discuss, early *exóticos* in the following decades eventually adopted the figure of the dandy as inspiration for their characters, breathing life back into the vilified, effeminate trope.

The villainization of effeminate men becomes apparent in many media forms from the decades following the scandal. Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba (2007) identifies a celebration of masculine virility on a national scale in cultural texts such as novels, films,

murals, and periodicals from the early twentieth century. He argues that in the male-centered nation-building projects of post-Revolutionary Mexico, effeminacy—especially through depictions of transvestism (such as in the *Baile de los 41*)—challenges the power of national virility, and thus holds emasculatory potential (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba *Modernity* 3). That is to say, those who are depicted in political cartoons, images, etc., can be emasculated when depicted as cross-dressing or effeminate. These forces feed into homophobia, which “is articulated in terms of the limits between what is and is not the national,” expressing a “rejection of forms and discourses that connote imperialist influence; for example, the ‘French’ mannerism of the elite” during the Porfiriato regime (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba *Modernity* 67-8). Homophobia, then, allows for a nationalist delineation between which gender performances are and are not acceptable, rejecting gender performances that connote foreign effeminacy.

Throughout recent history, then, the stereotype of the effeminate homosexual man has continued to shape Mexican gender performances. In his ethnographic research of Mexican homosexual men, Héctor Carrillo explains that “in Mexico, as in other parts of Latin America, popular discourses about male homosexuality have traditionally emphasized effeminacy and a ‘loss of manhood’” (Carrillo 351). Because of the threat of homosexual and feminine stigmatization, Carrillo argues that many of the men in his study avoided scrutiny of their sexuality, maintained their social status as ‘regular men,’ and protected themselves from stigmatization by performing masculinity (354). These men therefore practiced very selective disclosures of their sexual identities to friends and family members to maintain their masculine privileges. This resulted in many men in Carrillo’s study living in two different worlds, where they could use their “masculinity to hide their

homosexuality as needed” by “pass[ing] as hombres normales (normal men)” in one world, while in another, they were open about their sexual orientation (Carrillo 354). This dependence on performances of normative masculinity also reinforces the stigmatization of effeminacy, especially as performed by homosexual men, who Carrillo’s participants saw “as a barrier to the eventual acceptance of homosexuality in Mexican society and as a burden that prevented homosexual men from moving beyond the stereotype of the maricón” (355). Thus, according to the literature, femininity among Mexican men continues to be met with stigma and disdain, reinforcing the idea of femininity as the contaminating, inferior opposite of masculinity.

While anti-femininity has certainly left its mark on Mexican state-building projects, Domínguez-Ruvalcaba argues that despite—or, perhaps, due to—its homophobia and anti-femininity, the Mexican political structure has been characterized by homosocial bonds, pointing to the fact that homosociety and homophobia are in fact the two faces of Mexican masculinity (*Modernity* 4). Further, he argues that despite its stigma, the figure of the effeminate male appears so frequently throughout the twentieth century that it became an integral part of the national imaginary (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba *Modernity* 3). Thus, the figure of the effeminate male became a necessary part of imagining national Mexican masculinities. Similarly, Sergio de la Mora argues that in twentieth century Mexican cinema, the figures of the effeminate gay man and the drag queen have been crucial to the creation of male heterosexuality and the figure of the ‘macho’ (108). The figure of the *macho* as the sexually dominant man, then, defines itself in opposition to the figure of the woman and the effeminate homosexual man. Because of this, the figure of the *macho* is in fact created and sustained through these relationships.

While the line dividing masculine and feminine suggests that the boundaries of gender are well-guarded and implies that any crossover between the two categories would contaminate the content of masculinity and its virility, the fact that the two genders are built in relation to each other demonstrates the productive, creative potential of blurring the boundaries. Thus, while the reliance on the masculine-feminine and activo-pasivo binaries may appear to reinforce outdated or oversimplified frameworks, a closer analysis of the boundaries of these categories can reveal where slippages have occurred throughout Mexican history, and where these moments of interrogation and mixture have allowed for alternative modes of expression. Theorizing *exótico* performativity, therefore, will illustrate the creative potential and flexibility of these categories.

#### *Race, Class, Mexicanidad, and Lucha Libre*

While the previous works explore the connections between national values, gender, and sexuality highlighted in Mexican culture, these models overlap with the categorizations of race and class. The *Baile de los 41*, which has been discussed in relation to the discursive emergence of homosexuality, also provides insight into how class intersected with questions of sexuality and the nation. After the *Baile de los 41*, the representation of the dandy as an effeminate homosexual man became imbued with class connotations as well as gender and sexual stigmas. Penny press journalists used the opportunity to harness this emerging homophobic discourse to attack the Mexican bourgeoisie (Buffington 195). This pivoted the press coverage to conflate dandyism, luxury, and decadence with sexual deviancy and male effeminacy (Irwin et al. 12). In this case, lower- and working-class men who both created and consumed the press coverage symbolically distanced their

performances of masculinity from the perceived effeminacies and moral failings of the Mexican elite, fueling their anti-bourgeois sentiment with homophobia and anti-femininity, and questioning the role of the bourgeois as representatives of the Mexican nation.

These intersecting tensions were ultimately transposed onto the Mexican Revolution's generation of new ideas of who and what could represent Mexican culture and *mexicanidad*. Esther Gabara explains that throughout the 20th century, the limits of *mexicanidad* were debated by the state, the media, and artists who ultimately generated cultural texts included in national culture (2010). She explains that the "one thing they agreed upon was that the popular classes—urban workers and rural campesinos—would come to represent the national identity," and in the creation of a modern Mexico that would include Indigenous and *mestizo* communities, they aimed to create a discourse that could create unity without surrendering to their demands for political representation (Gabara 280). Thus, the question of class wove itself into emerging discussions of national culture, in which the inclusion of the working and lower classes was symbolically produced, without changing social or class inequalities.

Robert Neustadt explains that Mexican nationalist state-building projects sought to create unity through what he calls 'masking differences,' "to reconfigure and cover contradictory features in order to represent and lift the face of an imaginary national community... This invisible mask obscures the features of Others, thus erasing their needs and perspectives from public view" (414). In these state-building projects, differences along lines of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity would therefore need to be blurred to the point of obscuring divisions, despite their continued presence. Therefore, the analysis



of Mexican nationalism must be intersectional to understand the gendered, sexualized, classed, and racialized dynamics of *mexicanidad* and building the nation.

In the Mexican racial discourses emerging from this period, David Dalton argues that *mestizaje* came to stand in opposition to Indigenous identity, leading state officials to believe that “a prerequisite to modernization was the transformation of Amerindian individuals into mestizos, and they aimed to achieve this end through a process of race formation that used technology to modernize the indigenous body and transform it into a mestizo entity” (2). By casting *mestizaje* as the future, and Indigeneity as backwardness, the State attempted to force the assimilation of Amerindians through modernizing technologies such as “industrial agriculture, medical immunization, factory work in urban centers, and education. A person’s ability to function in a modern economy served as a prerequisite to mestizo subjectivity” (Dalton 4-5). This resulted not only in the erasure of Indigenous cultures and identities in Mexico, but also created what Dalton calls ‘mestizo normativity,’ the hegemonic validation of *mestizaje* that echoed Eurocentric constructs of power while simultaneously devaluing the Indigenous components of *mestizo* culture and heritage (8). These elements of *mestizaje* and *mestizo* normativity, fueled by the technologies of modernization, have mixed with Mexican nationalism to create what Dalton deems the “officialist discourses of *mexicanidad*” that would later be adopted by artists, writers, and Mexican politicians (12).

Continuing the exploration of *mestizaje*, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla’s work (1996) engages with the question of Indigeneity and assimilation in the creation of the Mexican nation. Throughout the centuries, Bonfil Batalla explains that efforts at national unity pushed for the assimilation of the Indigenous peoples of Mexico—not through inclusion,

but ‘De-Indianization,’ which he explains “is not the result of biological mixture, but of the pressure of an ethnocide that ultimately blocks the historical continuity of a people as a culturally differentiated group” (*Mexico Profundo* 17). This has resulted in viewing Indigenous cultures in Mexico as obstacles to progress, leading to the colonial attitude that “Mesoamerican civilization is either dead or must die as soon as possible, because it is of undeniable inferiority and has no future of its own” (Bonfil Batalla “Problem” 29). Thus, Mexican state builders set out to create unity not through inclusion and the celebration of diversity, but through a streamlined path towards a single identity: the *mestizo*. While the *mestizo* identity did diverge from Eurocentric ideals of whiteness, putting a ‘positive spin’ on cultural and biological mixture, it has also used similar tools to claim racial harmony while promoting Latin American exceptionalism (Telles 19). This focus on racial harmony has frequently distracted from racial inequality within Mexico, but cultural phenomena such as *lucha libre* allow for the peeling back of these idealistic discourses to reveal broader inequalities, especially through the intersections of race and class.

Today, *lucha libre* in many ways continues to promote discourses of modernization and progress in Mexico. Heather Levi’s 2008 ethnographic research (in which she trained as a *lucha libre* wrestler) points to the treatment of *lucha libre* as an urbanizing and modernizing force in Mexico. In one example from her study, Levi describes a young woman from the southern state of Oaxaca who was training in a *lucha libre* gym in Mexico City. Levi shares that the young *luchadora* (“wrestler”) was uncomfortable wearing shorts that exposed her legs while training, and she was mocked for wearing leggings. The instructors informed her that participating in *lucha libre* training was meant to ‘educate’ and ‘civilize’ her as a provincial Indian wrestler (Levi *World* 161). In fact, Levi notes that

many wrestlers (including *exóticos*) view themselves as ambassadors of modernization from the Mexican capital when they visit rural areas, and in the case of *exóticos*, they also view themselves as gay ambassadors to the ‘closeted’ provinces of the rest of the country (Levi *World* 155). *Lucha libre* has thus reflected broad discourses of modernization, *mestizaje*, assimilation, and gender, especially as it relates to *mexicanidad*.

As gay ambassadors, the *exóticos*’ engagement with the discourses of modernization in rural areas suggests that while the concept of homosexuality has had a historically tenuous relationship with the building of the modern Mexican nation, the *exóticos* in this case view themselves as part of the national path towards modernity and the future. Yet this attitude also emphasizes the stereotypical interpretation of rural areas as ‘uncivilized’ in their supposedly unprogressive attitudes towards LGBTTTI rights. In fact, some *exóticos* in my study expressed apprehension about traveling to small towns to perform, fearing that the locals would discriminate against them; these same *exóticos* expressed that it was a pleasant surprise to find that they were well-received rather than attacked. While their willingness to advocate for gay rights highlights the activist tendencies of many *exóticos*, this attitude also runs the risk of perpetuating the idea that the rural (and often Indigenous) communities of Mexico are inherently heteronormative and must adapt to the value systems of urban *lucha libre* to fit within modern Mexican society.

*Lucha libre* has therefore stood as an important example of *mexicanidad* as well as Mexican modernization and nationalism. It serves as a site where cultures and discourses come into contact, where Indigenous and *mestizo*, working- and middle-class concepts and interests converge. Some scholars have even suggested that the wrestling mask has an important connection to Indigenous traditions in Mexico, and therefore resonates with

urban Amerindian spectators (Dalton 153), though Heather Levi points out that the mask was first commissioned by a North American wrestler and fabricated by an urban, *mestizo* shoemaker in Mexico City in the early 1930s (*World* 110). Beyond the incorporation of Amerindian elements, Levi explains that in Mexico City, audiences and even *luchadores* themselves typically come from working- and lower-class communities (*World* 170). This is due in part to the fact that the wrestling profession is rarely lucrative, and few wrestlers can depend on *lucha libre* as their primary source of income (*World* 58). She observes that many *luchadores* wrestle with the understanding that their livelihoods are precarious; some work second jobs as taxi drivers, security guards, or even administrative jobs within *lucha libre*, while others study for degrees that qualify them for white-collar professions that they can rely on once their wrestling careers end (*World* 58).<sup>6</sup> Thus, both the audiences and the wrestlers tend to come from working-class backgrounds, pointing to the associations with lower-class and racialized aesthetics in representations of *lucha libre* and its connection to *mexicanidad*.

Despite its popularity, *lucha libre* has been subject to censorship and has adapted to changing demographics. After appearing on television for several years, *lucha libre* was taken off the air between 1956-1991, which redirected its viewership away from upper- and middle-class families with television sets, towards the popular classes who more frequently viewed *lucha libre* in person (Levi *World of Lucha* 193). Though its primary audiences had shifted, *lucha libre* continued to influence Mexican culture.

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<sup>6</sup> In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the *exóticos* in this study were forced to find alternate forms of employment during lockdown due to the limitations placed on *lucha libre* training and public events (Linthicum).

The shift in the composition of the wrestling audience to a more narrowly lower-class viewership has also fostered middle- and upper-class disdain of the genre, which Levi argues has only recently diminished with the re-emergence of *lucha libre* in middle-class areas of Mexico City (*World* 204; 233). When *lucha libre* came to be associated with lower-class spectators and popular culture, it came to be associated with ‘*naco* aesthetics,’ as seen in Lourdes Grobet’s photography of *luchadores* and their fans (Gabara 287). In fact, the term ‘*naco*,’ (a negative, usually racialized term meaning “cheesy” or “tacky”) and its use “as a racialized description of the luchas’ participants as much as of their aesthetic, show how certain forms of urban popular culture intervene in hegemonic articulations of national identity” (Gabara 280). Tensions over racial and class aesthetics, including the concept of ‘*naco*,’ converge in the site of *lucha libre*, helping to illuminate the continued social inequalities that persist in Mexico.

### *Sports, Gender, and the Nation*

Though *lucha libre* has been theorized in relation to modernization, class, and race, less has been written about how *lucha libre* connects to questions of gender and nationalism. What Hortensia Moreno has written about the intersections of violent sports, gender, class, and nationalism in Mexico can help contextualize the impact of these categories within *lucha libre*. Moreno identifies boxing as a sport that went from being an elite practice to being considered a sport of the poor, with implicated racial and ethnic assumptions to go along with it (“Women Boxers” 183). Thus, boxing in Mexico functions similarly to *lucha libre* as a site where class and racial inequalities are made more visible, and given the administrative merging of boxing and *lucha libre* within governmental

entities like the *Comisión de Box y Lucha Libre* (Commission of Boxing and *Lucha Libre*), their comparison allows for a greater understanding of the impact of *lucha libre* and boxing within popular culture.

Even further, Moreno's analyses of how this intersects with gender show just how much boxing can help shed light on *lucha libre*. Moreno's descriptions of boxing describe the sport as a technology of masculinity, a highly gendered space where masculinity is taught, performed, and constructed ("El Boxeo" 163). The gym, then, is the locus of praxis in which masculine values and behaviors are taught and regulated (Ibid.). In the *imaginario del boxeo*, ("the imaginary of boxing"), gender roles are clearly delineated, and while women can occupy the roles of spectators or romantic or emotional support for men, they are viewed as a threat when they 'invade' the homosocial space of the gym as boxers themselves (Moreno "El Boxeo" 164-167). With such highly visible gender divisions, this also reinforces the hierarchization of men and women within boxing and underscores the gym as a masculine space with gendered rituals and ceremonies (Moreno "El Boxeo" 179). By regulating the gym as a masculine space, the values of gender difference and hierarchies are normalized and replicated, and the presence of women produces a discordance.

As a spectacle, business, and industry, boxing inspires a great deal of cultural production, wherein the discursive construction of the boxing mystique posits the heroic, mystical figure of the boxer as a paradigm of masculinity, where values of self-sufficiency, courage, resistance, and bodily strength elevate the presence of violence to a symbolic level (Moreno "El Boxeo" 193). Because the masculine boxer serves as a heroic figure, Moreno argues that women boxers can challenge the ways in which the human body is constructed as a receptacle of national symbols (Moreno "Women Boxers" 181). However, Moreno

explains that because women face so many intersecting dynamics of exclusion from boxing and being accepted as representatives of the nation, the image of women athletes in the media often goes directly from invisibility to objectification without reaching the status of a national sports hero (Moreno “Women Boxers” 197). The masculinization of sports heroes and the masculine nature of sports as nation-building processes therefore forces women to conform to standards of hegemonic gender relations through the regulation and consumption of their bodies, even as they are working to challenge traditional gender norms (Moreno “Women Boxers” 189).

Within the context of this study, I apply Moreno’s analysis of gender and boxing to *la lucha exótica*. Moreno’s work shows both the challenges that exóticos may face, as well as the ways that they might respond to current gender systems at the intersections of contact sports and Mexican national culture. This study seeks to understand how exóticos can identify as men who perform femininity within a sports culture that regularly devalues femininity. Importantly, exóticos regularly refuse to be portrayed as weak and powerless; instead, as this study will argue, they articulate a combination of strength and delicacy; and of power and elegance. This study therefore seeks to understand how, in a sport and cultural phenomenon that is so closely tied to popular culture and representations of *mexicanidad*, the wrestlers themselves can hold and manipulate their symbolic potential to challenge the devaluation of femininity implied within hegemonic gender relations and refuse to bolster the superiority of masculinity. If *exóticos* can operate within such a symbolically charged arena, they too can challenge traditional gender norms and perhaps even serve as receptacles of national symbols, contesting the privileging of performances of hegemonic

masculinity with their own creative gender performances.

### *Lucha Libre as Culture, Sport, and Theater*

As a sport, a form of theater, and a visual representation of Mexican national culture and identity, *lucha libre* has staged several competing discourses. Heather Levi's research has focused on *lucha libre* and its connections to national and cultural identity in Mexico, arguing that it is precisely *lucha libre*'s unique positioning between sport, ritual, and theater that allows for the convergence of such a variety of competing cultural values (*World 6*). Rather than reading *lucha libre* separately as either sport, ritual, or a theatrical production, Levi argues that "all sport is drama, but wrestling is sport in the melodramatic mode," and in a country such as Mexico in which melodrama has been embedded within urban popular culture, wrestling in the mode of melodrama holds particular relevance (Levi "Sport and Melodrama" 61). *Lucha libre*, then, provides multiple points of access into Mexican popular culture.

In the 1970s, Mexican avant-garde artists began to draw from the imagery of *lucha libre* to reformulate 'lo mexicano,' ("what's Mexican") and because *lucha libre* had been withdrawn from the commercial world of television and made very few wrestlers rich (with a few exceptions such as El Santo), these artists viewed *lucha libre* as an example of uncorrupted, authentic Mexican culture (Levi *World of Lucha* 198). Throughout the years, *lucha libre* came to be viewed not only as a site of *lo mexicano*, but also as a cultural space populated by masked wrestlers whose participation in theatrical, morally coded fights and hidden identities made them cultural heroes (Levi 2008).



Levi argues that social activists learned to deploy the symbolically charged figure of the masked wrestler, creating the heroic ‘social wrestler’ SuperBarrio, who fought for housing rights in Mexico City in the 1980s (“Masked Media” 347). As a heroic figure whose identity was kept secret so that he could never be corrupted, SuperBarrio and the other social wrestlers who followed his lead avoided co-optation by political parties. This allowed them to represent their followers in ways that other political leaders could not, since their fictionalized selves could remain true to their ideals and more easily avoid intimidation (Levi “Masked Media” 347).

In fact, Super Gay, a masked gay activist, followed the lead of SuperBarrio by fighting homophobia and advocating for LGBTTTI rights in parades and other public demonstrations (Pereda and Murrieta-Flores 12). With various rainbows and iterations of the pride flag on his silver costume, an inverted pink triangle on his chest, and a wrestling mask, Super Gay tapped into both the visual resonance of the figure of the heroic *luchador* and the legacy of social activism stemming from this imagery. Though Super Gay is an activist within the social realm, some *exóticos* take activism to the ring, explicitly espousing gay pride and advocating for respect and diversity. Thus, with the figure of the wrestler as a potentially heroic character, and the world of *lucha libre* as a rich site of Mexican culture, *lucha libre* offers a unique perspective and point of entry into the intersections of Mexican politics, activism, national identity, and culture.

#### Lucha Libre, Gender, and Cinema

While *lucha libre* is easily recognizable within the Mexican context, what typically sets it apart from other countries’ forms of professional wrestling is the visual culture

inspired by the wrestling mask, which has become emblematic of *lo mexicano* and a defining element of Mexican culture (Cymet 25; Lieberman 3). The mask of the *luchador* is a powerful symbol, and the use of the mask is not granted lightly; in fact, a *luchador* who wishes to wear a mask is required to apply for a license from the overseeing *lucha libre* commission (Levi *World* 114). The removal of a wrestler's mask can therefore be a devastating blow, signaling not only the loss of the match, but also “a loss of face, of masculine status” (Rubenstein 571). Typical masked wrestlers such as El Santo never reveal their faces to the public, thus preserving the secrecy of their identity and their inner emotions. However, there are *luchadores* such as *exóticos* who choose to allow their faces to be seen by the public. While not all masked wrestlers are men, and not all men wear masks, the dynamic between masked and unmasked allows for a deeper understanding of how gender can be embedded within wrestling characters.

El Santo is a key example of how the *lucha libre* mask aligns with dominant understandings of gender and sexuality. Of the hundreds of *lucha libre* films that were produced between 1952 and 1983, El Santo acted in fifty, solidifying his presence as the cinematic star of *lucha libre* (Levi “Masked Media” 338). As a heroic character who boldly fought supernatural and human foes, saved damsels in distress, and calmly and strategically dominated his opponents, El Santo modeled a specific interpretation of masculinity that was both admirable—and, importantly, invulnerable—to the broad Mexican public (Rubenstein 577). Throughout El Santo's career, which spanned several decades, he was never unmasked by an opponent, and his mask became not only a central part of his character, but also an integral element of his performances of hegemonic masculinity, constituting what I call ‘maskulinity’ (Prechtel 107). The symbolic potency of the mask,

as well as its constant presence within *lucha libre* and its unfailing use by El Santo, therefore, blurs the boundary between masculinity and mask, and between *lucha libre* and the dominance of hegemonic gender relations.

As a cultural icon, El Santo served as an easily recognizable and celebrated model of these aspects of hegemonic masculinity since he represented the current values and narratives in Mexican culture throughout his decades-long film career (Pereda and Murrieta-Flores 6). Importantly, the form of masculinity that El Santo embodied was not static; it evolved over time to adapt to changing ideals in Mexican masculinity. Anne Rubenstein argues that El Santo represented this shift in the idealized form of masculinity, moving focus away from the stereotype of the ‘Mexican macho,’ as violent, impulsive, and unpredictable, to what she termed the ‘counter-macho,’ a more noble, humble, family-oriented model of Mexican masculinity (576). However, these performances of invulnerability and strength partially depended on his mask’s ability to prevent his face from betraying his feelings, which enabled him to hide certain emotions while performing others, allowing him to project an image of himself as a simultaneously stoic, compassionate, controlled, and successful hero (Lieberman 12). This not only upheld the interpretation of hegemonic masculinity within his context, but also allowed El Santo to align with the model of the invulnerable Mexican *macho* as described by Octavio Paz (Lieberman 13).

The fact that his mask makes this possible again reinforces the concept of masculinity and points to where the role of the mask can be destabilized by the queer interventions generated by *exóticos*. As the majority of *exóticos* do not wear masks, this study discusses how their symbolic opposition to masked men may engage in gender

dynamics of masked-unmasked, closed-open, masculine-feminine. Their facial expressions, emotions, and injuries are visible to the public, and since many have no mask or method for concealing their identities, they must be willing to live their lives publicly both on and off the stage. Arnulfo Vigil, a *lucha libre* historian, explains that it is nearly impossible to find a masked *exótico* because you cannot wear a mask on top of another mask; that is, *exóticos* already wear a mask: that of their hair and makeup, combined with that of their personality (Cavazos Torres 12). Today, this tradition continues, though as this study will show, younger generations of *exóticos* have begun to unravel these associations and are now interrogating the role of the mask by wearing masks themselves.

#### *Lucha Libre, Performance, and Exótico Drag*

The groundwork for studying *lucha libre* as a mode of performance has been laid by theorists who study wrestling. Roland Barthes famously shifted the focus on wrestling as a sport to wrestling as a performance by arguing that wrestling is a spectacle, specifically a spectacle of excess, in which the wrestler's main job is not to win the match "but to perform exactly the gestures expected of him" (3-4). Importantly, the performance of wrestling not only requires the participation of the wrestlers themselves, but also the participation of audience members. Wrestling thus depends on the collective cultural performance of the fans, anti-fans, referees, and wrestlers to make the spectacle come to life (Hill 176; Chow and Laine 44). Further—at least, within the context of *lucha libre*—Heather Levi has noted that actively participating fans perform as and represent the public sphere, highlighting the cultural and political relevance of *lucha libre* within the Mexican context (*World* 170).

*Exóticos* perform their roles as *luchadores* in a very distinct manner from those of their non-*exótico* counterparts since they tend to perform publicly queer identities. However, as explained in the documentary *Los exóticos*, not all *exóticos* are gay, and not all gay *luchadores* are *exóticos* (Ramos Araizaga). The *exóticos* of today argue that they have come to perform their queerness proudly, as opposed to prior generations of *exóticos* who portrayed themselves as comedic characters or even stage jokes (Ibid.). Through the exaggerated portrayals of their characters, as well as their use of makeup and costume elements that connote femininity, *exóticos* have frequently been compared to drag queens. Yet their form of drag does more than parody femininity: it blurs its boundaries.

*Exótico* drag merits attention because as a form of drag, it can uncover the performative nature of gender. Judith Butler explains that as an imitation of gender, drag “implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (187). Thus, in performing exaggerated femininity as well as masculinity, *exóticos* make it clear that their gender performances are theatrical. This in turn points to the theatricality of their opponents’ performances (which typically align with hegemonic masculinity) are performances as well. Importantly, this study explores how these performances can be contested through moves like *el beso del exótico* (“the *exótico*’s kiss”). As I will demonstrate, *exóticos* can call into question the sexual orientation of their opponents and force them to respond to the implications of homosexuality before an audience, while simultaneously illustrating the separation between a person’s performances of gender and sexual orientation, and their identity.

Thus, this study examines how *exótico* performances can destabilize various elements of a *lucha libre* match, from the way the audiences (and the wrestlers themselves)

interpret gender performances and displays of sexual or romantic attraction, to how a wrestler should look and act. Heather Levi's early work describes *exóticos* as 'drag queens,' highlighting their ability to engage with and appropriate signs of femininity while overthrowing their counterparts who frequently perform hegemonic or toxic masculinity (Levi "Lean Mean" 282). By mixing masculine and feminine performances—as evidenced by their hair and costumes, their make-up, and their violent, aggressive wrestling styles—*exóticos* disturb correlations between femininity and weakness, while "undermin[ing] the manhood of their opponents" (Levi "Lean Mean" 282). Importantly, as Levi points out, *exóticos* destabilize not only the gender performances of their opponents but also the dominant assumptions about the gender binary and the malleability of gendered categories such as 'man' and 'woman.'

With this destabilizing potential in mind, this investigation considers how *exóticos* engage with the notion that a wrestler must perform hegemonic masculinity to be taken seriously, and that only a cisgender, heterosexual man can be 'masculine.' In fact, Rudy Reyna, a prominent *exótico*, once proclaimed "*Soy más hombre de lo que cualquiera puede ser y más mujer que cualquier mujer, no una cualquiera,*" ("I'm more man than any man can be, and more woman than any woman, not one or the other") (Cavazos Torres 49). With this quote, Rudy Reyna not only defies the heteronormative gender binary, but also illustrates the excessive nature of his gender performances, which are so potent that they spill over the boundaries of 'man' and 'woman.' This connects to what other queer theorists such as J. Halberstam have argued about the performance of masculinity: 'masculinity' has never been produced exclusively by men; in fact, it has "also been produced by masculine women, gender deviants, and often lesbians" (241). Thus, the work of 'gender deviants'

such as *exóticos*, regardless of whether they identify as men, helps pry masculinity away from the model of the cisgender, heteronormative man—or in our case, the masculine wrestler. Therefore, this study seeks to demonstrate how *exóticos* contribute to the normalization of the expression of different masculinities and gender performances within *lucha libre*.

Finally, as *exóticos* contest the binary categorizations of gender and sexuality, they develop ambiguities in their performances that confound identification. Authors Nina Hoechtel (2015) and Janina Möbius (2007) explore these ambiguities, explaining how they allow *exóticos* to operate within liminal spaces that defy categorization. Hoechtel proposes the term ‘*juntopuesto*’<sup>7</sup> to describe how *exóticos* incorporate seemingly contradictory performances that undermine the boundaries of categories (“Lucha Libre,” 226). Möbius similarly identifies the methods that *exóticos* use to portray these contradictions, arguing that these performances stage stereotypes of homosexuality and femininity render *exóticos* paradoxical, ambivalent, and ironic figures with the potential to undermine the stereotypes that they perform (Möbius 384). The data in this study will therefore demonstrate how *exóticos* can harness their performances to create contradictory spaces in which they call into question the very stereotypes and tropes that they are performing.

#### *Exóticos and Non-Exótico Wrestlers*

As far as the performances of the wrestlers themselves go, the bulk of scholarship on the performances of *lucha libre* wrestlers has centered on traditional, non-*exótico* wrestlers. The study of wrestling and *lucha libre*, therefore, presents considerable

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<sup>7</sup> Hoechtel uses “againsttogether” in her other works (2016).

opportunities for engagement with performances of queerness within the ring. Chow, et al. observe that while most performances of wrestling rely on “stereotypical portrayals of hegemonic masculinity, its performance practice provides numerous possibilities for the exploration of queerness” (Chow, et al. 5). *Exóticos*’ performances of gender, then, as well as their deployment of wrestling moves that challenge heteronormative scripts, provide ample opportunity for the exploration of queerness within *lucha libre*.

Susana Vargas Cervantes (2019) follows this line of inquiry by analyzing *exóticos*’ notorious use of the *beso del exótico*, in which an *exótico* kisses their opponent on the lips, often at the behest of the audience. She explains that the kiss “is supposed to be read as a fantasy for the *exótico*, but a ‘punishment’ for the opponent, [sic] who are so ‘macho’ they could never stand to kiss another man,” arguing that the kiss can be read as “a sort of macho probado act in which machismo is reinscribed precisely because there is a macho that has ‘tested’ homoeroticism” (Vargas Cervantes *Little* 125). Most wrestlers react with an exaggerated flailing of their arms and legs, and facial expressions of fear, surprise, or disgust after being kissed, which usually gives the *exóticos* a momentary advantage. However, this interprets the behavior of non-*exótico* wrestlers after they’ve been kissed as if they fully reject the kiss and had no hand in its planning. This assumes that there is no collaboration between the wrestlers before the matches, which is easily disproved since most moves are visibly choreographed and require the participation of both parties to be successful. In fact, Heather Levi explains that there is a specific ‘ethic’ or ‘etiquette’ that requires a degree of professional collaboration and coordination between *luchadores* to maintain the theatrical aspects of performance (*World of Lucha* 42). In the case of the *beso del exótico*, we can interpret this to mean that most *luchadores* are well aware that there is



a strong possibility of being kissed by an *exótico* and may even help plan the moment in which they will be kissed.

Though the *beso del exótico* is a famous move, few authors have considered the implications of the kiss and how *exóticos*' 'weaponization' of gayness (Pereda and Murrieta-Flores 11) may reinscribe or potentially diffuse the charge of homophobia within the ring. The choreographed nature of *lucha libre* matches urges an analysis of how the *beso del exótico* may undermine, reinforce, or even destabilize the non-*exótico* wrestler's performances of heterosexual masculinity. While at first glance the *exótico* may appear to assume the masculine penetrator role who violates his partner within the ring, it could also be argued that in their performances of femininity, *exóticos* serve as foils who reinforce their opponents' performances of masculinity.

Though *exótico* performances may at times bolster their opponents' performances of masculinity, *exóticos* themselves have complicated relationships with masculinities. This dissertation therefore uses the term 'hybrid masculinities' proposed by Tristan Bridges and C. J. Pascoe (2014). As Bridges and Pascoe explain, hybrid masculinities allow men to selectively incorporate "performances and identity elements associated with marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities," while still retaining and concealing their other privileges associated with their gender, class status, or racial identity (246). Though *exóticos* play queer characters, many *exóticos* also claim publicly heterosexual identities and frequently distance themselves from homosexuality by insisting that their queerness is just an act. This study therefore considers how heterosexual *exóticos* navigate their own identities, as well as how queer *exóticos* may interpret their role in *lucha libre*, paying particular attention to discourses of authenticity and appropriation.

As the data will show, heterosexual *exóticos* appropriate elements of queer identities and performances of femininity to embody their characters, but queer *exóticos* also engage in contradictory performances that complicate assumptions about gender and sexuality. This allows for the work of José Esteban Muñoz to be extended to the case of *exóticos* as they perform stereotypes of femininity and homosexuality in a way that both affirms and undermines their meanings. By engaging with oppressive dominant ideologies, and then scrambling their encoded meanings to recycle and reform them, Muñoz argues that performance artists can transform harmful discourses to represent minoritarian subjectivities (31-9). This work therefore considers how *exóticos* can employ disidentificatory strategies to engage with and transform harmful dominant discourses such as homophobia and transphobia through their work as wrestlers, especially using moves such as the *beso del exótico*.

Beyond their disidentifications with homophobic discourses in *lucha libre*, *exóticos* employ specific gestures and movements to communicate their experiences and share ideas with their audiences. In addition to *el beso del exótico*, *exóticos* have a repertoire of gestures and stereotypically feminine behaviors such as “limp wrists and puckered lips,” in addition to violent pins and moves like the *rana invertida* (“inverted frog”) that place their opponents in sexually suggestive positions in order to dominate them (Levi *World* 154; Levi “Lean Mean” 278). Diana Taylor’s concept of ‘the repertoire,’ which describes how knowledge and embodied memory can be transmitted through performance, including gestures, dance, movement, orality, singing, etc., can apply to the host of strategies and gestures included within *exótico* performance (Taylor 20). Their moves and pins are performed in front of audiences in conjunction with other wrestlers (who collaborate),

allowing *exóticos* to communicate their experiences as *exóticos*, while challenging ideas of homosexuality, effeminacy, and strength. Thus, Taylor's concept of the repertoire can uncover and expand the cultural histories and legacies of homophobia that are embedded and contested within *exótico* performativity.

### *Respect(ability), Acceptance, and Representation*

Though this body of literature clearly demonstrates the complexity of the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, race, *mexicanidad*, and nationalism, the data generated during my interviews with my participants ultimately directed my research into more specific areas: character design, gender identity and sexual orientation, the performances associated with these categories, the presence of trans identities within *lucha libre*, and finally, to discourses of respect and respectability. Many *exóticos* throughout the study articulated a desire for respect, which they argued that they deserved as consummate professionals who take their careers as *exóticos* seriously. Because the second round of interviews for this study occurred during the 2022 Pride Month festivities in Mexico City, discussions of respectability and gay pride gained more salience within our interviews.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's (1993) concept of the politics of respectability helps explain the attempts by a marginalized group—in her case, impoverished Black women in the Baptist Church from 1880-1920—to contest dominant ideologies that would otherwise oppress them by adhering to norms of respectability. While this applies to the context of the United States over a century ago, this clearly describes the experiences of queer groups within Mexico City that attempt to gain the respect of the public by aligning with dominant values. This study considers how this concept may apply to the *exótico*

category—which includes people who openly identify as gay, trans, and others who articulate a broadly queer identity—and how they might stake a claim on respectability, as well as the potential consequences of this strategy.

To understand the repercussions of a politics of respectability, this investigation considers how attempts to gain respect across a marginalized community might create another layer of exclusion within their own group, a phenomenon that theorist Susan Stryker (2008) describes as a double marginalization. While Higginbotham's politics of respectability and Stryker's descriptions of trans experiences were conceived within the North American context, they help explain how queer *exóticos* view themselves within the broader queer population of Mexico City, and how they anticipate the public's interpretation of their and other queer people's behaviors, leading many *exóticos* to express concern about individuals who act provocatively, unprofessionally, or otherwise threaten to tarnish their reputation.

This study will demonstrate that this process leads to the double marginalization of trans women within the *exótico* category. While the *exóticos* in this study broadly describe their category as men performing gayness, the presence of trans women who wrestle as *exóticas* both underscores the performances of femininity, while undermining the idea that all *exóticos* and *exóticas* are men. As the trans women cited in this study will discuss, the *exótico* category simultaneously gives them space as professional wrestlers, while forcing them to constantly defend their identities as women—not gay men—and navigate institutional transphobia. Thus, while the *exótico* category presents itself as a queer-inclusive haven, I will argue that this space continues to center *men*, not women, suggesting that even within spaces that celebrate queer identities, there is still work to be done.

## Methodology

This dissertation uses an intersectional approach to understand how *exóticos* perform and articulate their understandings of gender and sexuality, employing an interdisciplinary approach that bridges sociological theory, gender and sexuality studies, queer theory, performance studies, and cultural studies. In doing so, I generate a more complete discussion of the structural, social, and cultural dynamics that facilitate, limit, and generate *exóticos*' challenges to hegemonic gender relations and discrimination against queer identities. While this study draws on the data from 16 semi-structured interviews and may not be generalizable to the entire *exótico* population of Mexico, I aim for this study to contribute to the documentation of *exótico* experience and lay the groundwork for future ethnographic studies.

This is a mixed-methods investigation, meaning that in addition to theoretical work and engagement with literature, my investigation has primarily been shaped by data collected during my fieldwork. I used qualitative methods—primarily by combining ethnographic and interview methods—because qualitative methods “have the potential to explore ruptures between individuals’ stated opinions and beliefs (such as those they might express in survey questionnaires), on the one hand, and their actual behaviors, on the other hand, since the latter may not always reflect the former” (Gottlieb 48). Because of my reliance on semi-structured interviews, I also recognize that the data analyzed in this study is based on participants’ perspectives and accounts of their own actions, which is not necessarily an accurate report of events and experiences. While this study does not include quantitative data beyond a brief description of the general demographics of the participants,

the data generated through the interviews provides rich insight into the complicated relationships between *exóticos*' lived experiences, how they move through the world, and how they articulate and justify their own opinions and beliefs.

I received IRB approval to conduct 30 semi-structured interviews with *exóticos* and attempted to use snowball sampling to identify and recruit potential participants. Through the snowball sampling method, *exóticos* used their personal connections to help me identify other potential participants and industry professionals. However, my main form of recruitment took place via social media. I shared social media posts with graphics advertising the study and directly messaged several users on both Facebook and Instagram. I located around 65 luchadores on these platforms who I knew or believed to be *exóticos* and contacted them with general information about the study and followed an IRB-approved recruitment script. I followed up with those who were interested in participating or helping me via WhatsApp and other messaging platforms to coordinate interviews. Another academic helped me get in touch with Polvo de Estrellas, who graciously agreed to be my first interview participant. Polvo de Estrellas also offered to share my information with his *exótico* peers, which I believe gave other potential participants an idea of who I was and what I was looking to achieve with my study. Ultimately, however, most of my recruitment success came from directly contacting wrestlers on their social media accounts.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with *exóticos* both online and in-person and asked for permission to keep recordings of our interviews. Perhaps the most important step of my protocol was laying the groundwork for having multiple interviews and ongoing collaborations with *exóticos*, which allowed me to contact them if I had follow-up questions. Another protocol design that adapted my research to the population's unique

needs was providing participants with a name preference form during the informed consent process. I wanted to ensure that all *exóticos* could control the degree of privacy or publicity that they might receive through this study, and this gave each of them the chance to determine how I would refer to them in my future publications. They could choose to use their legal name, the name of their *exótico* character, or a pseudonym of their choosing. In the end, all participants decided to use their wrestling character names for this study.

I had initially planned to conduct my preliminary field work in Mexico City during the summer of 2020, but those plans were postponed to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The following academic year, I conducted two rounds of field work, one from September to December of 2021, and a second 3-week period during June 2022. The multiple opportunities to conduct field research allowed me to develop my relationships with local collaborators and the participants in the study while enhancing my reputation among potential participants to facilitate recruitment for the study.

I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews between 2021 and 2022. Interviews generally lasted between one and two hours (including the informed consent process) and were conducted in Spanish. If they took place in person, the interviews occurred in cafés, while online interviews occurred within the privacy of my home or hotel room. Participants were given physical or digital copies of the paperwork and were told they could contact me at any point to redact information or discuss concerns about the study. While the participants were given \$1000 MXN at the end of the interview process, I assured them that they could stop the interview at any point without jeopardizing their receipt of compensation. I recorded each of my interviews via audio or video, depending on whether the interviews took place in-person or online. After transcribing each interview, I uploaded

it to the NVivo software, which allowed me to identify themes, code the data, and adjust my interview questions accordingly.

One of the primary hurdles of networking with *exóticos* was what I perceived to be a lack of a centralized *exótico*-specific space that I could enter. *Exóticos* live all over the country, train in various gyms, and are constantly traveling for events. Finding a single location in which I could meet *exóticos*, then, proved difficult, especially with the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, because *exóticos* are not frequently contracted by the *Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre* (CMLL), which has the largest and most easily accessible stadium in Mexico City, I was only able to see one *exótico* at the four CMLL *lucha libre* matches I attended throughout my study. While there are gyms and stadiums that *exóticos* do frequent, these locations were in neighborhoods that I had been warned to avoid as a foreigner. I therefore opted to meet with *exóticos* for interviews in public spaces that I was familiar with, mostly in cafés in the Zona Rosa (the queer-friendly district), La Condesa, and the Centro Histórico.

During the initial round of field work in the fall of 2021 and extending into the beginning of 2022, I conducted 8 interviews in-person and on platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp. This created flexibility for the participants to decide which method of communication best suited their comfort levels and availability. While an in-person interview provides rich contextual data in addition to what is spoken during the interview, the online interviews gave me insight into *exóticos*' personal lives; some offered to show me their homes, others were able to dress themselves theatrically and do a more elaborate presentation than they might do in public spaces, and I was able to speak with *exóticos* who lived across the country. While there were occasional issues with internet connectivity, the



online interviews ultimately gave me greater access to *exóticos* than I would likely have had before the pandemic.

During the initial round of field work, I networked with several professionals and experts within the general field of *lucha libre*. This included speaking with non-*exótico* wrestlers, fans, filmmakers, a *lucha libre* mask maker, collectors, curators, moderators of Facebook fan pages for *lucha libre*, vendors, authors and journalists specializing in *lucha libre*, professors, referees, and *promotores* (“promoters”) who organize *lucha libre* events. This allowed me to gain insight into the broader *lucha libre* industry and some of the challenges and changes the industry faced in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the local history of the sport and its cultural impact. While I initially struggled to connect with *exóticos*, one of the experts I spoke with explained that my presence was already known within the *lucha libre* circles of Mexico City; it was merely a question of contacting the right people and showing my sincere interest that would help me recruit participants.

During my field work in Mexico City I also visited state archives, museums, and other cultural sites where I hoped I would find any documentation of *exótico* wrestlers or representations of *exótico* wrestling. Confirming my suspicions, I found very little official documentation of *exóticos* in the archives I visited and few mentions of *exóticos* on the *Box y Lucha* website, which hosts a digitized collection of one of the most well-known and longest running *lucha libre* publications. I made multiple attempts to contact the two major professional *lucha libre* commissions: the *Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre* (CMLL) and *Lucha Libre AAA Worldwide* (AAA), but I never got a response from either. However, one of my participants connected me with the members and leaders of the *Sindicato Nacional de Lucha Libre* (“National Lucha Libre Union”) and the *Comisión de Box y Lucha Libre*

(“Commission of Boxing and Lucha Libre”) in Mexico City, as well as the leader of the local chapter in León, Guanajuato. Through these professional connections, I learned about the issues *luchadores* face, such as professional development and medical care, and the steps that these chapters have taken to support professional wrestlers.

During this primary round of field work, I attempted to recruit *exóticos* through networking and snowball sampling, but I found that many *exóticos* regarded me with disinterest or suspicion. I imagine this was because they are frequently contacted by journalists or small-scale social media influencers. Some *exóticos* shared that they are suspicious of strangers asking them to fill out long consent forms because there have been cautionary tales of *luchadores* inadvertently signing away their rights to their characters when filling out paperwork. I was even told of *exóticas* like Wendy Gaviota being exploited by film crews and journalists who portrayed her in a negative (even transphobic) light without ever paying her what they had promised. Both Wendy Gaviota and an *exótico* named Yuriko explained to me that they would be willing to do interviews but felt that the amount of time and IRB paperwork that I requested was too much for a free interview. They valued their time and their stories and felt that a free interview would provide them with little benefit.

They were right. At the end of each interview, I asked *exóticos* what I had missed during our conversation, and what message they would want to share with the rest of the world. While many *exóticos* shared that they were happy to be included in a study and that *exóticos* would become better known in the United States, many also seemed aware of the limited scope of my project’s reach. I took Wendy and Yuriko’s comments about compensation to heart—while representation can be a powerful tool, direct financial

compensation has a more immediate, and potentially profound impact. As Alma Gottlieb argues, “the time is long past for social scientists to expect people, especially impoverished people from developing world nations, to take time away from their own labor or other affairs to freely provide information for the sake of disinterestedly contributing to the goals of science” (62). I determined that if I wanted to ask *exóticos* to lend me their professional characters for this study, and share such personal details, it would only be fair to give them some form of support in exchange.

With these issues in mind, after completing my first 8 interviews, I updated my interview protocol and secured funding from the Tulane University School of Liberal Arts so that I could compensate the participants. I decided to offer \$1000 MXN (roughly \$50 USD at the time) to compensate my participants for their time and efforts sharing their stories. I wanted to demonstrate that I understood that their perspectives are valuable, but also that they are professionals who could be using this time to otherwise earn income. After receiving IRB approval to compensate *exóticos* through cash payments, gift cards, and through Western Union transfers and bank deposits, I opted to compensate my first 8 participants as well. This change to the protocol rapidly improved my recruitment outcomes. *Exóticos* who perhaps were wary of me and my interest in conducting interviews may have viewed the offer of \$1000 pesos as a legitimating factor, or at least a guarantee that an interview wouldn't be a waste of their time. When I began my second round of recruiting for my return to Mexico City in June 2022, I was able to secure 8 more interviews within a span of three weeks, bringing my total to 16.

During my interviews I also obtained permission to review my participants' public social media pages and use images and videos that they posted in my analysis. I reviewed

the captions that accompanied these publications, as well as how other users responded in the comments. While most *exóticos* had broadly positive fanbases and had many supportive comments on their posts, I also saw posts and comments on *lucha libre* league pages where *exóticos* were ridiculed.

Throughout my field research process, I took field notes when engaging with any *lucha libre* experts or entering *lucha libre* spaces. I observed *lucha libre* matches, the performances of wrestlers, the interactions among wrestlers and with their audiences, and how *lucha libre*, *exóticos*, and gender are broadly understood and discussed. This included filming and recording *lucha libre* matches, *lucha libre*-themed tours through Mexico City, images of *lucha libre* in art and public murals, and museum exhibits with representations of *lucha libre*. Though my data analysis heavily centers the interview data, these anecdotes about *lucha libre* in the day-to-day happenings of Mexico City helped enrich my understanding of *lucha libre*'s position in Mexican popular culture and how it feeds into the tourist industry.

My research began as an exploration of how *exóticos* become *exóticos*: their first experiences with *lucha libre*, how they choose their careers as professional wrestlers, how they come to choose and design their *exótico* characters, how their families and friends have (or haven't) supported these decisions, how they experience and perform gender and sexuality in their daily lives and as their characters, how the *exótico* category has changed over the years, and how they may experience discrimination and obstacles based on their identities as *exóticos* and as individuals. Though the interviews initially had a heavier focus on wrestling masks and the *beso del exótico*, I soon realized that *exóticos* were also interested in discussing respect and respectability, their professional development and

training, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the inclusion of trans *exóticas* within the category, which ultimately shaped the interviews over the course of the field work. I also found that I lacked a clear definition of the term ‘*exótico*,’ and set out to involve *exóticos* in defining the category with me.

While the literature concerning *lucha libre* engages with discussions of gender, sexuality, race, nationalism, and class, the development of my dissertation has followed a grounded theory approach. As Joyce Magnotto Neff explains, a grounded theory methodology requires a researcher to systematically and intensively analyze their data until a provisional theory emerges, cycling through stages of analysis and data collection through interviews as the theory is developed (125). This required regularly reviewing and analyzing the data between interviews and responding to and incorporating relevant themes into my interview questions as they emerged from the data. Thus, despite the importance of race, class, and nationalism in understanding the context of *lucha libre* and *exótico* wrestling, many of these topics remained in the background of our interviews, rarely being explicitly mentioned by *exóticos*.

Though my research centered on experiences of conceptualizing and performing gender and sexuality among *exóticos*, I avoided explicitly asking them to identify their gender and sexual identities. Following the suggestions of Amin Ghaziani and Matt Brim’s *Imagining Queer Methods* (2019), I wanted to critically consider the historical and cultural context of all categories of gender and sexuality that I employed in this study, rejecting these categories as universal, ahistorical, and unchanging (10). I wanted to avoid limiting *exóticos*’ descriptions or categorizing them within models that may not accurately reflect their lives. Instead, I waited for them to disclose the information to me as they saw fit,

which many made sure to clarify before ending the interview. Yet even among those who did describe their gender identities and/or sexual orientations, I found that many evaded clear categorizations, whether intentionally or not. For example, many *exóticos* and *exóticas* described themselves in relation to women and men, both adopting and refusing these labels throughout our interviews. Some alluded to experimenting with their sexuality and/ their gender performances, while explicitly refusing labels of ‘LGBTQ+,’ ‘LGBTTTI’ or ‘gay.’ *Exóticos* therefore proved themselves to be adept gender maneuverers and navigators, eluding categorization and adopting labels contextually to suit their needs, while never allowing themselves to be pinned down. It is this exact discursive and performative capacity that I believe makes the *exótico* category so powerful and intriguing: their capacity to shift and adapt allows them to harness and topple categories and hierarchies to suit their needs.

### *Participant Biographies*

This section describes the participants of this study as their *characters*. Each participant had the opportunity to choose how their names would appear in any publications resulting from this study, and all the participants chose to be identified by their wrestling names. The descriptions of the participants, then, will focus on how they present themselves as their characters.

While this study did not collect demographic information, the diversity of the *exótico* category makes itself apparent in the range of ages, levels of training, degrees of fame, sexual orientations, and gender identities of the wrestlers who participated in this study. Of the 16 participants, 15 wrestle within the *exótico* category. Fourteen expressly

identified as *exóticos*, and one named Wendy Gaviota identified as an *exótica*, which is the feminine expression of the word ‘*exótico*,’ because she is a trans woman. While 15 participants wrestle within the *exótico* category, one *luchador* named Princeso argued that he is not an *exótico*, though his character, performances, and mannerisms lead many to assume that he is. The participants in this study had been wrestling as *exóticos* anywhere from roughly one to forty years, and many had come to adopt their characters after initially wrestling *de hombre*, (“as men”), as non-*exótico luchadores*.

Finally, of the 16 participants, 15 identified as men, 7 explicitly self-identified as homosexual, 7 explicitly self-identified as heterosexual, and 2 expressed having queer identities but did not use a specific label to describe their sexual orientations. Though I did not directly ask for this information, many chose to share their gender and sexual identities with me to describe their experiences as *exóticos*. However, these identities may be situational, changing, and subject to their level of trust and comfort with me during the interviews with the understanding that this could become public knowledge.

This section provides brief descriptions of each of the participants’ characters in this study, listed in alphabetical order:

*Bizhota*: With several years of training and professional experience under his belt, Bizhota created his current character during the COVID-19 pandemic. His look includes a mask that covers his nose and mouth, dramatic eye makeup and long black hair. His costumes feature pastels, rainbow patterns, holographic and metallic materials, shoulder pads, and leggings.

*Cariñoso Jr.:* Cariñoso Jr.'s father wrestled as the *exótico* 'Cariñoso,' and passed his character down to his son. Since he began wrestling professionally during the COVID-19 pandemic, Cariñoso Jr. has made the character his own, adding more makeup to the character while still maintaining the sleek, hot-pink or black costume styles that his father wore.

*El Demasiado:* Though young, El Demasiado has quickly established himself as a mentor to other aspiring *luchadores* and *exóticos* and has even created his own *lucha libre* collective and publication with the same name, *Mi Sagrada Lucha Libre*. El Demasiado tends to wear one-armed leotards, a lightning bolt painted over his eye, and fuzzy boots.

*Diamantina:* Diamantina excitedly joined this study and wore a Pharaoh-style costume headdress and colorful sunglasses on camera. He took care to explain during our interview that everyone experiences varying degrees of sexual attraction, and values being a good ally to his gay friends. Though he had initially trained as a dancer, he got into *lucha libre* for revenge after his brother was injured by an opponent during a *lucha libre* match.

*La Chona:* La Chona and I conducted our interview over WhatsApp as he tended his *licuado* ("smoothie") stand in Mexico City. He shared his experiences over several decades as an *exótico*, as well as his excitement about his growing collaboration with his friend Lady Arcoiris.



*Lady Arcoiris (a.k.a. Sexy Arcoiris)*: Lady Arcoiris is a relatively new *exótico* wrestler, and while he is proudly gay and passionate about activism, he had not initially planned on wrestling as an *exótico*. He excitedly showed me his *lucha libre* mask during our interview and talked me through his evolving costume designs.

*May Flower*: May Flower's legacy as an *exótico* is undeniable. As one of the first *exóticos* to publicly claim a gay identity, his impact on the *exótico* cannot be overstated. He was incredibly kind, open, outgoing, and humble during our interview, and has friends wherever he goes.

*Polvo de Estrellas*: Polvo de Estrellas similarly has a long history as an *exótico* and is most known for his metallic silver and gold face paint and wigs imitating the Cher haircut. Though more reserved than May Flower, Polvo de Estrellas shared a wealth of history within the *exótico* category. He thoughtfully engages in activism and has collaborated with many scholars before me. He generously and patiently gave me insight into networking with other *exóticos*.

*Princeso*: Though not an *exótico*, Princeso sees why I would have thought he was. Because of his mannerisms, his movements, and even his stylization as a Prince Charming character, Princeso believes that his character intersects the *exótico* category. Despite pressure from other *exóticos*, he is reluctant to become an *exótico* because he wants to chart his own path.

*Rasputin:* Rasputin brings an energy to his performances and even our interview that I had not yet seen. When watching videos of his wrestling, you can see his constant acrobatics and flexibility. As an *exótico* from the state of Oaxaca, he aims to bring elements of Oaxacan design and imagery into his character, including vibrant colors and a sparkly mask that covers only his eyes.

*El Bello Ray (a.k.a. Raymunda):* During our WhatsApp video call, El Bello Ray shared stories of growing up around his queer friends and feeling comfortable taking on the *exótico* character. He spoke of undergoing a career and character change, and shared ideas for the future of his style and the *exótico* category.

*Ruby Gardenia:* An icon of Tijuana and *exótico* wrestler, Ruby Gardenia (La Chiquilla de Tijuana) is an accomplished scholar, teacher, and wrestler. With her extravagant headdresses and colorful costumes, Ruby is bursting with passion and energy and is a talented and engaging speaker. She is not afraid to speak truth to power, and her stories of discrimination, rejection, and triumph show both the beauty of *lucha libre*, and the institution's mistreatment of queer wrestlers.

*Sexy Flama:* Sexy Flama grew up watching his father wrestle professionally and describes the magic and surprise of the first time he learned his father was the masked wrestler up in the ring. As an *exótico* now, Sexy Flama takes his role as an ambassador seriously, explaining that even if he doesn't identify as gay, it's his job to speak up against discrimination.

*Venus Radiante*: Venus Radiante is exceedingly passionate about training as an *exótico*. As a young wrestler, Venus Radiante's career is just beginning, but already shows great promise. Venus Radiante strives for excellence and underscored the professional aspect of *exótico* wrestling.

*Wendy Gaviota (a.k.a. Miss Gaviota)*: Wendy can do it all: she is an *exótica*, an aesthetician, an actress, a singer, and has an exuberant, charismatic presence. She immediately embraced me when we met at the cafe and was ready to help my project however she could. Her honesty and humor made our conversation endlessly fun.

*Yuriko*: Yuriko is very kind, opinionated, witty, and well-connected. He shared that his name inspiration came from his grandfather's Japanese heritage, and it's coincidentally the name of one of his favorite cartoon characters. In fact, he argues, nobody knows his 'real' name. Yuriko is both an open book and an enigma, and he wants the world to know he's ready for his feature documentary.

## **Dissertation Outline**

### *Chapter 1: Defining 'El Exótico'*

Chapter 1 introduces readers to the general field of *exótico* wrestling, profiling a few prominent *exóticos* and the diversity of *exótico* character and costume styles. This chapter defines *exótico* as a character that performs femininity and delicacy in conjunction with strength and toughness. While any wrestler can perform as an *exótico*, regardless of

their sexual orientation, the prevailing assumption is that *exóticos* are self-identified men who perform gay characters by performing femininity. Because of this definition, the *exótico* category pushes trans *exóticas* into an uncomfortable position in which their identities are disrespected, and frequently must defend and explain their presence as women.

This chapter also details how heterosexual *exóticos* may appropriate a queer identity to perform their characters, and how other *exóticos* deploy *exótico* normativity to determine the authenticity of these wrestlers. While the first *exóticos* lived publicly heterosexual lives, the category has evolved from performing as metrosexual, effeminate dandies, to proudly proclaiming their homosexuality. Today, *exóticos* still navigate some tensions regarding just how queer their characters can and should be, but ultimately the performance of femininity and queerness is exactly what many believe makes an *exótico* authentic.

### *Chapter 2: Performing 'El Exótico'*

Chapter 2 explores how *exóticos* perform femininity and stereotypes of homosexuality to realize their *exótico* characters. This chapter discusses how *exóticos* demonstrate the concepts of gender performativity and hegemonic gender relations, and how *exóticos* undermine the stability of these categories through their performances. This opens to an analysis of how *exóticos* perform and cultivate ambiguity surrounding their characters and their personal lives, and how this allows them to undermine dominant categorizations of gender and sexuality, proving that one's performances of gender do not necessarily represent one's gender and sexual identities. Though *exóticos* do not

necessarily claim publicly gay identities to match their characters, their gender performances allow them to experiment with gender creativity and freely express themselves.

*Exóticos* may use this distance between their personal lives and their characters to create space for experimentation, but they may also use their characters to test the waters within their social circles. Some *exóticos* never explicitly discuss their sexual orientations with their family members, but feel that because they perform as *exóticos*, their families understand and accept them without need for any labels. This chapter concludes with a discussion of how *exóticos* trouble binary models of ‘coming out,’ but also how sexually nonconforming *exóticos* may ultimately be expected to shoulder the burden of sustaining familial acceptance.

### *Chapter 3: The Beso*

This chapter explores one of the most well-known and contentious moves within the *exótico* repertoire: *el beso del exótico* (“the *exótico*’s kiss”). This chapter charts the history and application of the *beso* and how it has evolved alongside the *exótico* category as a move that charges the match with drama. Calling into question the relationships between masculinity and dominance, as well as femininity and weakness, the *beso* allows *exóticos* to resist and reimagine the limits of binary ways of thinking. While the *beso* allows for *exóticos* to play with and contest binary understandings of gender and the power dynamics sustaining hegemonic gender relations, the *beso* also threatens to overshadow their other qualities as professional wrestlers.

This chapter examines how *exóticos* apply the *beso* to the men they wrestle against, but also how the *beso* is used on audience members, fans, and referees, and the potential impact of this move outside of the context of a match. Despite being regarded as an essential element of *exótico* wrestling, the *beso* has also been labeled as ‘vulgar,’ testing the limits of ‘family values’ and censorship. It has even been conflated with a lack of professionalism, leading some *exóticos* to now question its utility. As an element that has previously been used to determine an *exótico*’s authenticity, the future of the *beso* within *exótico* wrestling is now up for debate.

#### *Chapter 4: Exótico Discourses of Respect: Gender, Marginalization, and Respectability*

This chapter examines the interpersonal and institutional forms of discrimination that *exóticos* experience in their personal and professional lives. Though *exótico* performances celebrate queer identities and employ non-normative gender performances, they are still constrained by the institutionalization of masculine dominance, which sustains a connection between respect, honor, and masculinity. This burdens *exóticos* and trans *exóticas* with claiming or performing elements of masculinity in order to gain access to respect and social status, even if it potentially contradicts their gender and sexual identities.

*Exóticos*’ emphasis on respect throughout our interviews urges a discussion of heteronormativity, homonormativity, and their overlap with a politics of respectability and the challenges that marginalized groups face as they are pressured to assimilate to dominant value systems. While a politics of respectability allows queer *exóticos* to claim respect in some areas and contest negative stereotypes, it also incurs criticism against *exóticos*, *exóticas*, and queer Mexicans who do not comply with the norms of respectability or who

are viewed as a threat to the reputation of their group. This leads to a justification for discrimination against some individuals (in this case, against *exóticas*), whose behaviors are believed to threaten the *exótico* subculture. By cultivating positive public images, *exóticos* can justify their presence within discriminatory spaces, but at the cost of potentially reinforcing the exclusion of other members of their category.

Finally, this chapter explores how *exóticos* deploy discourses of respect to structure their interactions with each other through hierarchies. These strategies allow them to develop kinship networks, share resources, and develop themselves professionally, while pushing back against homophobic and misogynist stereotypes. Ultimately, this chapter argues that while *exóticos* can contest negative stereotypes through the exchanges of respect, these practices may also enable the scapegoating of other marginalized members of their category.

### **Contributions**

This dissertation documents and amplifies the experiences and perspectives of *exótico* wrestlers both as a subculture and as a category of wrestlers with growing popularity. This research contributes to the growing discussions of gender performativity with *exótico* wrestling and the broader cultural implications of *exóticos*' performances on cultural attitudes towards *lucha libre*, *exóticos*, and LGBTTTI activist movements. This dissertation celebrates the potential for *exótico* performances to challenge binary conceptualizations of gender, sexual orientation, and their interactions with systems of hegemonic gender relations that perpetuate gender inequality. As *exóticos* strategically maneuver between performances of masculinity, femininity, and beyond, they cultivate

ambiguity and elide categorization to suit their needs, never allowing anyone to pin them down. Yet this dissertation also focuses on the distance between the values of diversity, respect, and inclusion that *exóticos* profess, and the shortcomings of their own category. I aim to provoke honest discussions about the limits of *exótico* performances, their relationships with each other, their work as role models and advocates, and where there is room for growth in creating more inclusive spaces within *exótico* wrestling. By centering *exóticos*' experiences and processes of performing gender, I hope to document the strategies they use for navigating and contesting discriminatory spaces, while also recognizing their work as professional entertainers who greatly enjoy their jobs and the freedom that comes with being *exóticos*.

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I received Tinker Field Research funding and grants from Tulane University through the Stone Center for Latin American Studies, the School of Liberal Arts, and the Phyllis M. Taylor Center Changemaker Catalyst Award to travel to Mexico for field work. These grants made my international travel possible and supported my research through two years of data collection, analysis, and writing. This funding also allowed me to provide compensation to the interview participants during my field work in Mexico City.

During my initial round of field work from September through December of 2021, I had the opportunity to work as a visiting investigator at the *Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios de Género* (“Center for Investigations and Studies of Gender”) at Mexico City’s Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. This allowed me to access their library, participate in seminars, and meet students, staff, and faculty. Attending their graduate



seminars on gender and sexuality studies gave me the opportunity to participate in discussions of several texts that are also taught in U.S. courses, as well as theoretical and ethnographic works written by Mexican and Latin American authors, which helped me familiarize myself with many of the current debates in the field. Their generosity gave me unparalleled access to literature and materials that were unavailable to me in the United States.

### **Notes on Language and Conventions**

Unless noted otherwise, all interviews with *exóticos* that are cited in this dissertation were conducted for the purposes of this study. I have translated all interviews to English and have included the original Spanish text either immediately above the translation, or in the footnotes of the page to save space. I have attempted to maintain the integrity of the spirit of these translations by including Spanish terms in the body of the text, which I translate to English for a non-Spanish speaking audience.

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## DEFINING ‘EL EXÓTICO’

### **Introduction**

With his dark brown shoulder-length hair flying behind him, Bizhota delivers a swift kick to his *exótico* opponent Cariñoso Jr., sending him to the ground. Bizhota’s multicolored pastel leotard covers his torso and arms, leaving his legs covered in flesh-colored tights.<sup>8</sup> His white knee-high boots and knee pads match the armor-like shoulder pads that give his outfit an athletic, warrior-like edge. Bizhota typically sports elaborate eye makeup, including colorful eyeshadow, false eyelashes, and dark eyeliner, which complements his dark arching eyebrows. Though a sparkly pink mask covers his mouth and nose, the determination on his face is apparent as he runs from one corner of the ring to the next, diving into Cariñoso Jr.’s chest and sending him through the cords, out of the ring, and into the audience. He follows him into the crowd, doing a somersault flip over the cords and into the audience, where he is caught by other wrestlers before he grabs Cariñoso Jr. by the neck and tosses him back into the ring. After successfully dragging his opponent by the leg and leaving him on the ground, Bizhota saunters away, stretching out his arms and shimmying his shoulders and hips to the applause of the crowd.

El Demasiado, a young *exótico* who mentors other young *luchadores*, provides a counterpoint to Bizhota’s style. Though less spry than Bizhota, El Demasiado’s<sup>9</sup> movements denote power. His black bodysuit echoes the style of older *exóticos*, leaving

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<sup>8</sup> See Figure 4.

<sup>9</sup> Also known as ‘Demasiado’ or ‘Dema.’

one arm and one leg bare, with silver highlights along the edges.<sup>10</sup> He wears knee-high gray boots covered in shaggy fur, which rustle with his movements as he launches a new attack against his opponent. His short brown hair features fuchsia highlights that complement his dark, subtle eye makeup and the magenta and gold lightning bolt painted across the right side of his face. He runs to the cords of the ring, bouncing into them, and turns back to face his opponent who follows him closely. El Demasiado catches him around the waist, lifts him over his head, and inverts him. With his opponent's legs up over his head, El Demasiado spins several times before throwing his opponent down onto the mat, and lands on top of him in a reclined position.



Figure 4 (left), and Figure 5 (right). Hernandez, Jose Luis. Promotional photo of Bizhota (left), and photo of El Demasiado (right) taken by Angel Arana, from Facebook.

While both videos show that these *exóticos* are triumphant in their matches, their costumes, makeup, hair, and even wrestling styles are unique. Bizhota's colorful style and El Demasiado's darker, more mysterious qualities, underscore the variety of character

<sup>10</sup> See Figure 5.

design choices available to *exóticos* today. These two *exóticos* are not only contemporaries, but friends who collaborate in the promotion of *exótico* wrestling through the league *Mi Sagrada Lucha Libre* (“My Holy Lucha Libre”), spearheaded by El Demasiado.

Looking further into the past, video footage from 1994 of Pimpinela Escarlata, May Flower,<sup>11</sup> and Rudy<sup>12</sup> Reyna (who has been called ‘The Father of the *Exóticos*’), shows these pioneers of contemporary *exótico* wrestling during the early years of their popularity. Pimpinela Escarlata dances and twirls his way to the ring, his long violet robe speckled with silver stars flowing behind him to reveal a tiger stripe swimsuit. The suit has deep chest and back cleavage, with high cutouts on the hips that show off Pimpinela’s legs. His cropped curly hair bounces as he throws back his head and strikes a pose, continuing to dance along the outside of the ring. Suddenly, an opponent already inside the ring reaches through the cords and begins to hit him. May Flower quickly intervenes, intercepting one of the punches directed at his friend. The camera abruptly cuts to Rudy Reyna entering the stadium, dancing and twirling to show off his leopard print leotard, which reveals less cleavage than Pimpinela’s, but follows similar cuts that show ample leg and buttocks. His sheer red robe is lined with white ruffles, which flutter as he dances and greets the audience in the front row. As he climbs into the ring, an opponent kicks him, knocking him back onto the ground. The camera cuts away just as chaos ensues.

As the match continues, Pimpinela Escarlata, May Flower, and Rudy Reyna begin to take heavy kicks and punches as they are flung across the ring and clotheslined by their opponents. May Flower’s head snaps back violently as he is repeatedly hit, but he continues

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<sup>11</sup> Occasionally referred to as ‘May Flowers,’ though he confirmed that his name should be in the singular form.

<sup>12</sup> Occasionally spelled ‘Ruddy.’

to rally and fight back. His movements are fluid and elegant, but also exaggerated, which contrast with the solid, heavy movements of the men who hit him. May Flower's metallic gold bodysuit, featuring a wide neck and showing off his shoulders and upper back, matches his golden curls,<sup>13</sup> which his masked opponent grabs brusquely as the camera pans. When it returns, May Flower's head is draped back across the cords of the ring, his opponent putting his foot on his throat and slowly applying pressure, stepping on the underside of May Flower's chin. Once given a chance to breathe again, May Flower is thrown from the ring towards the audience. One after another, May Flower, Rudy Reyna, and Pimpinela Escarlata are thrown about. The grainy video blurs many of their features, but the bold framing of May Flower and Pimpinela's faces from their makeup and hair helps exaggerate their grimaces, anger, and laughter. Their opponents' expressions, completely covered in black masks, remain inscrutable.



Figure 6. Roy Lucier AAA Lucha Libre. Still of May Flower from the video "La Ola Lila."

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<sup>13</sup> See Figure 6.

By the second and third rounds, the *exóticos* begin to win. Each of the *exóticos* takes turns jumping from the cords and delivering kicks to their opponents' faces, celebrating their victories with clapping, twirling, dancing, and interacting with the audience to encourage their cheers and applause. Pimpinela strikes a feminine pose, putting his feet together, popping a hip up to the side, and putting one hand on his waist with the other victoriously in the air. He quickly runs his hands through his hair before planning his next move. Later on, Pimpinela delivers a wide-swinging punch to his opponent's face, knocking him to the ground. The opponent struggles to stand up, but once he does, Pimpinela climbs up into the corner of the ring, does a backflip over him, and lands on the mat behind his opponent with enough time to grab him and throw him to the ground, conducting a series of *llaves* ("holds"), and *castigos* ("punishments"). After he grabs his opponent by the neck and hurls him down, Pimpinela leaps to his feet and celebrates. In the end, amid much commotion, the *exóticos* are declared the winners.

These videos highlight the athletic and creative capacities of these *exóticos*, but how exactly would one know they are *exóticos* in the first place? What clues might designate these wrestlers as *exóticos*, rather than *luchadores* in the general men's or women's categories? This chapter examines the growing community of *luchadores exóticos* and their diverse gender identities, sexual orientations, character designs, and performative styles to offer a definition of 'exótico' and the 'estilo exótico' ("exótico style"). The variations in style and character among contemporary *exóticos* makes it difficult to determine a fixed definition, but the basis of all *exóticos*' descriptions of their category points to one key element: performing gayness. While *exóticos*' personal styles may vary, *exóticos* consistently incorporate stereotypes of male homosexuality—such as

delicacy and femininity—and perform toughness and strength to create what they describe as the *exótico* style. In doing so, they trouble the boundaries of the binary division of masculinity and femininity, suggesting new possibilities for gender expression and gender relations.

Because of the diversity of wrestlers and styles, *exóticos* may encounter tension within their own category as they seek to describe themselves. This chapter argues that *exóticos* employ ‘*exótico* normativity’ to evaluate the authenticity of other *exóticos* and uphold the coherency of the *exótico* category. Grounds for conflict within the *exótico* category range from an *exótico*’s adherence (or lack thereof) to the *estilo exótico* in wrestling styles, character design, gender identity, sexual orientation, and how they locate themselves within narratives of *exótico* evolution. *Exóticos* therefore deploy *exótico* normativity to determine the authenticity of their peers: those who are perceived to be putting on too much of a show, or who do not ‘naturally’ perform the gayness of the *exótico* character, may be considered inauthentic or ineffective. While this serves to criticize or exclude other *exóticos*, this strategy also allows *exóticos* to discursively shape how they represent themselves and their category.

This chapter traces the evolution of *exótico* wrestling and introduces several *exóticos* and their characters as an opportunity to explore their creative processes and strategies behind their *exótico* performances. The participants interviewed in this study constituted a wide range of ages, years of experience, gender identities, sexual orientations, and aesthetics, underscoring the diversity of their category. However, out of the 16 interviews conducted for this study, one *luchador* explained that he does not identify as an *exótico*. Though Princeso aligns with the *exótico* category in many ways due to his



performances, character design, and close ties with his *exótico* friends, he has resisted the label for years (though he admits that becoming an *exótico* is not entirely out of the question). While he is not an *exótico*, Princeso's case reveals many of the qualities that could lead someone to identify a *luchador* as an *exótico*, as well as the implications of wrestling as an *exótico* that Princeso has worked to avoid.

This chapter refers to these wrestlers as '*exóticos*,' but the term '*exótico*' itself refers to a professional wrestling *character*. Some *exóticos* may identify as *exóticos* both in their personal and professional lives, but for the most part, *exóticos* make it clear that this is a character and not necessarily a faithful representation of their personal identities. It is this exact separation between character and performer that allows *exóticos* of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations to adopt the *exótico* title—and, as some *exóticos* argue, allows them to appropriate and abuse the *exótico* character.

### **Defining '*El Exótico*'**

Defining '*el exótico*' is difficult because of the variety of individual wrestlers and the changing conglomeration of wrestling styles over the decades. While costumes, makeup, and character design constitute crucial elements in an *exótico*'s character, many *exóticos* emphasized the importance of the *exótico*'s personality and performance. To this end, *exóticos* described the *exótico* as a gay character, which typically involves a self-identified man incorporating displays of femininity with masculinity. While not all *exóticos* identify as men (as will be presently discussed, *exóticas* are currently interrogating their place within the category), their social positions as men who perform elements of femininity render them legible as gay characters. Despite their individual and changing

styles within the category, *exóticos* have consistently adhered to nonnormative performances of gender, regardless of whether they adopt the label of ‘gay.’

### *Performing Gayness*

Yuriko, who began his career in the early 2000s, exudes a friendly, engaging, and even conspiratorial energy. When asked what exactly makes an *exótico* an *exótico*, he argues that an *exótico* is a *gay luchador*. He explains that *exóticos* are either gay men playing a gay character, or they are straight men who are bringing a gay character to life. While acknowledging that not all *gay luchadores* perform as *exóticos*, Yuriko brings up an important point: the *exótico* character has been stereotyped as gay for the last several decades. As Leonardo Bastida Aguilar and Ariel Cruz Ortega argue, *exóticos* are usually assumed to be *gay men*; they are *varones afeminados* (“effeminate males”) located within the gay culture (39). Yuriko echoes this, explaining: “we’re homosexuals, yeah, but before being homosexuals, we’re men.”<sup>14</sup>

Though Yuriko and the majority of *exóticos* identify as men, this does not preclude them from exploring their gender identities, some even identifying beyond the options of ‘man’ or ‘woman.’ In Fernando Cavazos Torres’s descriptions of Rudy Reyna’s wrestling career, he claims that Rudy’s life philosophy was always “I am more man than any man can be, and more woman than any woman, not one or the other”<sup>15</sup> (49). This attitude suggests that Rudy expressed himself beyond the bounds of the gender binary, and Nina Hoehchl argues that Cassandro el Exótico, one of the most successful *exóticos* in the category’s history, similarly expresses a fluid, all-encompassing, or even ambiguous

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<sup>14</sup> “somos homosexuales, sí, pero antes de ser homosexuales, somos hombres.”

<sup>15</sup> “Soy más hombre de lo que cualquiera puede ser y más mujer que cualquier mujer, no una cualquiera.”

approach to the binary when he says “[w]e *exóticos* are homosexuals, and that’s how we fight. We don’t experience a conflict with being men and women at the same time” (“Wrestling with Burlesque” 77). At once claiming a homosexual identity and expressing same-gender attraction, Cassandro also rejects the need to adhere to one gender category or another. Rather, *exóticos* like Cassandro cultivate the ambiguity surrounding their characters, exploiting varying expressions of queerness.

Though Cassandro and Rudy Reyna articulate more fluid expressions of gender, *exóticos* are overwhelmingly labeled as men, which allows them to exploit the seemingly contradictory expressions of masculinity and femininity within their acts. In fact, Yuriko’s use of the label ‘homosexual’ evidences the long tradition of *exóticos* deliberately connecting their characters (or even themselves) with gay identities, and, frequently, with Mexican LGBTTTI<sup>16</sup> communities and activist networks. In fact, Ruby Gardenia, whose boisterous costumes and personality make her unforgettable, describes choosing to be an *exótico* as a social responsibility that allows her to advocate for the queer communities of Mexico (Ayala). Many *exóticos* approach their roles as *exóticos* similarly, arguing that they have a duty to the public to create positive representations of queer identities.

Because of this close proximity with queer identities, Bastida Aguilar and Ortega Cruz argue that *exóticos* are not merely men personifying women or exaggerating stereotypes of femininity; rather, *exóticos* go beyond personifying these stereotypes because they in fact represent a part of their own identities as part of the gay culture (38). For this reason, many *exóticos* like Lady Arcoiris and Venus Radiante, who are in the first few years of their careers, argue that the *exótico* character allows them to be themselves

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<sup>16</sup> The acronym ‘LGBTTTI’ represents *Lesbiana, Gay, Transexual, Transgénero, Travesti, Intersexual*.

and perform queerness freely. Several *exóticos* connected these performances to their ability to be *afeminados*, especially since many *exóticos* perform common stereotypes of male homosexuality in Mexico.

Wendy Gaviota,<sup>17</sup> the first openly trans *exótica*, explains that *exóticos* use their hair, makeup, costumes, and even their gestures and body movements to imitate a gay man, even if they themselves are not gay. *Exóticos' equipos* (“equipment” or “costumes”) are often heavily feminized, including eye-catching designs in sparkles and rhinestones, and dramatic makeup on their faces. As the young *exóticos* Sexy Flama and Lady Arcoiris explain, an *exótico's equipo* is very different from that of a *luchador normal* (“normal wrestler”), since they tend to be more elaborate and colorful, often including *mallas* (“tights”), makeup, longer hair, and even painted nails. Ximena Rojo de la Vega Guinea explains that these stylistic trends blend queerness, camp, and drag: “the essence of the *exóticos* [sic] is that of artifice and exaggeration... regardless of whether they identify as macho or queer” (112). In fact, several *exóticos* (including Yuriko) perform femininity to the degree that they mentioned being mistaken for women or for *travestis* (people who practice crossdressing). May Flower adds that when he and Pimpinela Escarlata first began wrestling, they started to incorporate elements of *el ambiente*<sup>18</sup> (the “queer community” or “scene” of Mexico) and *travestismo*. The two observed what the people in the *ambiente* wore and began to add items to their costumes, including sequins, rhinestones, feathers,

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<sup>17</sup> She wrestles as ‘Miss Gaviota.’

<sup>18</sup> Rodrigo Laguarda explains that the term ‘*ambiente*’ was likely derived from the term ‘gay’ (“happy,” “cheerful”) that denotes an aptitude for partying (157). Susana Vargas Cervantes argues that belonging to the *ambiente* goes beyond describing one’s sexual preference for people of the same sex, to also connoting a lower or lower middle-class status (158).

hats, garters, pantyhose, and makeup. This allowed them to give a touch of the queer *ambiente* to their *exótico* characters and to *lucha libre*.

Beyond the visual design of the *exótico* character, the wrestlers find additional ways to embed elements of femininity. *Exóticos* choose names that allude to qualities or social objects associated with femininity, or they feminize qualities that are traditionally associated with masculinity (Bastida Aguilar and Cruz Ortega 37). Bastida Aguilar and Cruz Ortega cite names such as Gardenia Davis, Adorable Rubí, Babe Sharon, Cassandro, etc., which they argue conjure images of femininity through qualities such as delicacy, enchantment, divinity, and beauty (38). Today, many *exóticos* include the terms ‘Sexy’ or ‘Dulce’ (“Sweet”) in their titles, while some simply incorporate the word ‘*Exótico*.’

Because of their performances that evoke femininity, *exóticos* are often compared to drag queens. Through their connections with drag performance as performers who traverse gender boundaries, Rojo de la Vega Guinea argues that “*exóticos* shatter (or attempt to shatter) binary narratives of *lucha libre*,” both in terms of masculinity and femininity, and even in terms of the categories in which they wrestle: *rudo* (“tough” rule-breaker), or *técnico* (“skilled” rule-follower), troubling the very categorizations that ensure their place within *lucha libre* (112). As Tabea Huth describes, the great majority of *exóticos*’ appearances could be categorized as gay, *vestida* (“cross-dressed”), or *afeminada*, but they are also physically aggressive (280). These ambivalences and contradictions make *exóticos* entertaining performers who may seem unpredictable to audiences as they rapidly fluctuate between and combine being aggressive, elegant, and occasionally comical.

Bizhota argues that in addition to the colorful fashion that highlights their creativity, *exóticos* must also perform the character correctly. He explains that an *exótico* can typically

be identified by their behavior, their manner of walking, their constant dancing, and movements that he describes as playful and folkloric. In their interpersonal interactions, he argues, an *exótico* is often using the *beso* (“the kiss”)<sup>19</sup> against their opponent and slapping them, interspersed with dancing and having a good time. Cariñoso Jr., a heterosexual *exótico* who has recently begun his career, echoes this, describing *exóticos* from prior generations who would approach the ring with a rose in hand, and perhaps a mirror or a bottle of perfume in the other. An *exótico*’s walk, Cariñoso Jr. explains, is sexy, sensual—not something that you would see from any non-*exótico* wrestler.

While these elements certainly help identify an *exótico* wrestler during a match, an *exótico* might choose to only incorporate some of these elements or none at all, because the essence of the *exótico* lies within the character’s *personality*. El Demasiado argues that this is possible because the *exótico* is defined more by his personality than by his clothing, gender, or sexual identity. He later adds: “the personality *has* to be homosexual,”<sup>20</sup> and explains:

Mientras tu personalidad tenga este aporte de elegancia, de homosexualidad—porque la verdad, ese toque de homosexualidad es lo que nos diferencia de los demás luchadores—y es lo que nos hace ser exóticos. O sea, muchos podrían decir que por la vestimenta, pero yo creo que podría[s] subir a luchar con un solo calzón, como los exóticos de antes, y verte exótico. Porque hasta los exóticos de antes tenían ese grado de homosexualidad, aunque no lo demostraran abiertamente.

While your personality might have this element of elegance, of homosexuality—because honestly, that touch of homosexuality is what differentiates us from the other *luchadores*—that’s what makes us *exóticos*. I mean, many could say that it’s because of the costumes, but I think that you could go up into the ring to wrestle *con un solo calzón* [“in only your underwear”], like the *exóticos* from before used to do, and you’d look like

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<sup>19</sup> While the debates surrounding the *beso* will be covered in a future chapter, it should be understood as a move that *exóticos* use against their masculine opponents to distract or attack them during a match.

<sup>20</sup> “la personalidad tiene que ser homosexual.”

an *exótico*. Because even the *exóticos* from before had that degree of homosexuality, even though they didn't show it openly.

An *exótico* could therefore break from every costume, hair, or makeup convention, and still perform the *exótico* character and be recognized as such.

Beyond the more obvious gestures and decorative aspects, a crucial element of performing the *exótico* character is through physical embodiment. Sexy Flama explains that when he begins to wrestle, he has to transform how he moves his body, “because if I wrestle like a *luchador normal*, well the people, honestly, they're going to say, ‘That's not an *exótico*, he's wrestling as a *luchador normal*.’”<sup>21</sup> *Exóticos* therefore use physical performances to communicate their identities, requiring some *luchadores* to adapt their characters' wrestling styles and mannerisms. Polvo de Estrellas, an openly gay *exótico* who debuted in the 1980s, explains that he went through this process when he transitioned from being a ‘normal’ *luchador* to an *exótico*: having avoided appearing effeminate throughout his training and early career, he had to make concerted efforts to learn how to dress, apply makeup, and move like an *exótico*, relying on the help and guidance of other *exóticos* and *luchadoras* (“women wrestlers”). Bizhota similarly had to retrain himself mentally and physically when he began wrestling as an *exótico* and explains that he still occasionally catches himself reverting to his older, non-*exótico* character during training. These comments underscore the need for *all exóticos*, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, to practice performing an *exótico* character.

Bizhota further expands the differences between the physical performances of *exóticos* and non-*exóticos* by focusing on how they move and walk:

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<sup>21</sup> “porque si lucho como un luchador normal, pues la gente, la verdad, va a decir ‘Esto no es un exótico, está luchando como un luchador normal.’”

Por lo general, los luchadores... normales, siempre como te digo, tratan de mostrar una postura agresiva, una postura fuerte, una postura antes, pues, como tal de un hombre fuerte que el que va a pelear. Entonces, creo que siempre se ven muy agresivos caminando, como que muy fuerte. Y el exótico, no. El exótico busca el caminado, este estético, el caminado en puntas, entrar como bailando, entrar con vueltas, eso creo que es la gran diferencia.

In general, *luchadores... normales* ["normal," non-*exótico* wrestlers], like I've been saying, they try to show an aggressive posture, a strong posture, and, well, just like a strong man who's going to fight. So, I think that they're always going to look very aggressive walking, like very strong. And the *exótico*, no. The *exótico* seeks the *caminado* ["walk"], the esthetic walk, walking on tiptoes, coming in dancing, spinning, [and] I think that's the big difference.

Many *exóticos* therefore imbue their characters with these movements, aiming for a musical, flowing, energetic style over a slow, hulking, aggressive one. However, Bizhota also argues that *exóticos* are strong and must be able to demonstrate their toughness in addition to their elegance.

When discussing body movements and being *amanerado* ("mannered" or "effeminate"), Yuriko explains that *exóticos* often incorporate *ademanes* ("gestures") that connote femininity, such as walking sensually, having flexible or even floppy wrists, or dancing. Movements such as these are attached to stereotypes of femininity and gayness, which allow *exóticos* to perform the homosexuality of the *exótico* character more clearly. However, Yuriko adds that *exóticos* who are not gay have to do *ademanes* that are more forced, exaggerating their movements to look like *jotitos* (a slang term for gay men that some *exóticos* use with affection). Emphasis on the word '*jotitos*' again underscores the gay quality of the *exótico* character while suggesting that the *exóticos* make this gayness highly visible through their body movements. May Flower explains that this has become



part of the stereotype of *exóticos*, solidified by himself and others who like to *jotear*<sup>22</sup> in the ring by “wrestling normal, normal, and suddenly, a movement—an *exótico* movement, a gay movement—and that’s what the people learned.”<sup>23</sup> This has become so ingrained within the *exótico* category that Venus Radiante, who at the time of our interview had been training for just over a year, joked, “If you know how to do your makeup, and you know how to *jotear*, what else is there to being an *exótico*?”<sup>24</sup>

These movements and behaviors not only constitute the *exótico* character, but also fuel its disruptive potential. As they perform femininity, *exóticos* engage with stereotypes of homosexuality in a way that challenges negative and homophobic connotations. Heather Levi explains that through their interactions with other wrestlers, *exóticos* portray themselves as forces to be reckoned with, because “having the power to dominate masculine *técnicos*—even if only temporarily, and only some of the time—in itself undermines the stereotype of gay men as contemptible beings incapable of defending themselves (and thus their honor)” (Levi *World* 176). This performative potential not only challenges the abuse of and discrimination against effeminate homosexual men, but also places the gay *exótico* in a position of power. Beyond challenging masculine supremacy, *exóticos*

ejercicios verbales y corporales, expresados públicamente, dan cuenta, repetidamente, de la naturaleza arbitraria de la clasificación de los signos – raciales, étnicos, sexuales, de género, de la clase, etc.–, de la posibilidad de su manipulación, contestación, reinención o equivocación y, permanentemente, a través de todas estas posibilidades, del cambio. (Hoechtl “Lucha Libre” 235)

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<sup>22</sup> Heather Levi translates ‘*jotear*’ to ‘camping it up’ (“Masked Media” 357).

<sup>23</sup> “Luchar normal, luchamos normalito, y de repente, un movimiento—un movimiento exótico, un movimiento gay—y era lo que la gente aprendía.”

<sup>24</sup> “Se sabe maquillar, sabe jotear, qué más que el exótico?”

verbal and corporeal exercises, publicly expressed, [make people] realize, repeatedly, the arbitrary nature of the classification of signs –racial, ethnic, sexual, of gender, of class, etc.–, of the possibility of their manipulation, response, reinvention or mistaking and, permanently, through these possibilities, of change. (my trans.; Hoechtl “Lucha Libre” 235)

Through this multifaceted nature of the *estilo exótico*, *exótico* performances not only challenge gender hierarchies, but also brim with potential to perform and display the complements and contradictions of stereotypes associated with masculinity and femininity.

### *El Estilo Exótico: ‘Recio y Delicado’*

The broadness of the *exótico* category certainly allows wrestlers to develop unique costumes and styles, but they must maintain their intelligibility as *exóticos*. A *luchador* may think that they need only pretend to be gay to be an *exótico*, but Diamantina,<sup>25</sup> who debuted in the 1990s, explains that *el estilo exótico* is a difficult art to perfect. He argues that not just anyone can perform the *estilo exótico* because: “you have to know what an *exótico* is allowed to do, and what they’re not allowed to do, and how to carry the character... There are even *exóticos* who are born with that ideology,<sup>26</sup> right? But even so, the *exótico* character is hard for them. So it’s really difficult.”<sup>27</sup> As Diamantina frames it, the *exótico* character and style are not easy to improvise and require an understanding of the category’s nuances and conventions to perform effectively.

In describing the *estilo exótico*, many *exóticos* underscore the layers of contradictions that *exóticos* embody as they vacillate between and move through

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<sup>25</sup> See Figure 7.

<sup>26</sup> Here, Diamantina uses ‘ideology’ as a way of alluding to being gay.

<sup>27</sup> “...tienes que saber qué es lo que sí se permite hacer un luchador exótico, y qué no, y cómo saber llevar a un personaje... Hay luchadores que pues, ya nace con este, esa ideología, ¿no? Pero que aun así les cuesta el papel del luchador exótico. Entonces, es muy difícil.”

stereotypes of masculinity and femininity (Huth 2012). One of the requirements that *exóticos* describe is the ability to blend being *recio* (“tough”) and *delicado* (“delicate”) into their performances. As Bastida Aguilar and Cruz Ortega explain, *exóticos* break with the masculine image, but continue to demonstrate that they are just as capable, strong, tenacious, brave, and muscular as their rivals, making clear that their homosexuality is not synonymous with weakness (30; 42). *Exóticos* therefore embody contradictions that challenge the gender binary and any assumptions of inferiority or inability. Wendy Gaviota reinforces this concept, explaining that she is a tough wrestler, but when she’s not being tough, that doesn’t mean that she is being weak or fragile. Rather, *exóticos* and *exóticas* like Wendy Gaviota assert that they implement a combination of all these qualities.



Figure 7. Diamantina Luchador Exótico. Diamantina walking across the cords of the ring with the help of another wrestler, from Facebook.

Cariñoso Jr. explains that what first interested him in *exótico* wrestling was his father’s performance of the role of ‘Cariñoso,’ and the way that *exóticos* would use *rudeza* (“toughness” or “rudeness”) in conjunction with *delicadeza* (“delicacy”). In his own

wrestling, Cariñoso Jr. makes an effort to show his *rudeza* in the ring by “knowing how to hit, not just giving a kiss, right? Being *amanerado*... but with the *rudeza* of a man up in the ring.”<sup>28</sup> His description of toughness being an indication of masculinity, with delicacy connecting with femininity, shows that he views the *exótico* as a wrestler capable of mixing gender performances. Cariñoso Jr. later adds, “‘*Amanerado*,’ here in Mexico, is used for an effeminate man, no? With *modismos* [“idioms” or slang] from the LGBT culture, right? ... Delicate. A delicate man. *Curioso* [“curious” or “quaint”], that’s what *amanerado* is in a man... I’d say it’s like a waiter without the tray.”<sup>29</sup> at which point he held his right forearm up and flipped his hand back, his wrist going limp. While this movement feeds into the stereotype of the effeminate gay man, it also constitutes what many would identify as part of the *exótico* repertoire of body movements.

Cariñoso Jr. uses the term ‘*amanerado*’ to describe a man who uses feminine or delicate gestures, but he also emphasizes being tough and aggressive, which he attributes to being masculine. Diamantina similarly explains that *exóticos* should be glamorous and delicate in their movements, but only up to a certain point, suggesting a need for equilibrium between being glamorous, delicate, and feminine, with being tough, aggressive, and masculine. Rather than alternating between the two, however, Diamantina explains that *exóticos* today attempt to be *recio* and *delicado* at the same time, but also with the capacity to switch between each, suggesting a fluid movement, even as he positions these two qualities as opposites. The balancing, incorporation, and blending of the qualities

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<sup>28</sup> “El saber dar un golpe, saber pegar, no solamente dar el beso, ¿no? El sí ser *amanerado*... pero con la *rudeza* de un hombre arriba del ring.”

<sup>29</sup> “‘*Amanerado*,’ aquí en México, se utiliza para ver un hombre afeminado, ¿no? Con *modismos*, dentro de la cultura LGBT, ¿no? ... *Delicado*. Un hombre *delicado*. *Curioso*, eso es lo *amanerado* en un hombre... Yo lo diría, como el mesero sin charola.”

associated with *recio* and *delicado* therefore map onto the binary of masculinity and femininity even as they disturb its borders, illustrating how *exótico* performances and the *estilo exótico* allow for the interrogation of the divisions between these qualities and the potential for creating new expressions of gender.

### *The Mask*

When it comes to traditional *lucha libre* costumes, many wrestlers choose to wear a mask, which often becomes a wrestler's brand. The mask creates a hidden identity and a sense of mysticism that has come to define Mexican *lucha libre* in popular culture (Lieberman 3). The mask "symbolizes not only the persona of the individual wrestler but the mystique of *lucha libre* itself. It functions in the arena as a concentrated point of dramatic tension," in part because the mask allows the wrestler to create a dramatic personality, and also because the mask can be removed, revealing the secret identity of the wrestler (Levi "Sport and Melodrama" 65). With the promise of such dramatic tension, why do *exóticos* choose not to wear a wrestling mask?

Rojo de la Vega Guinea argues that because "traditional *lucha libre* is the spectacle/sport of masks... when *exóticos* appear without masks, in feminine dress and make-up, they innovate and defy tradition" (112). Though many non-*exótico* luchadores also wrestle without masks, only *exóticos* incorporate the feminine dress, make-up, and gestures that Rojo de la Vega Guinea describes. As part of their category's base design, then, the choice to not wear a mask allows *exóticos* to subvert norms within traditional *lucha libre*.

Nina Hoechtl even goes so far as to describe the decision of *exóticos* to wrestle without masks as *un acto queer* (“a queer act”) (“Lucha Libre” 241). She cites the example of Pimpinela Escarlata, who had wrestled with a mask before assuming his openly gay *exótico* personality, like many *exóticos* in this study had done. Hoechtl explains that for Pimpinela Escarlata, the mask has “a masculine gender, and the public confronted him for being a *joto*, so he had to unmask himself... This act has allowed him to ‘go out *joteando*, like an *exótico*’<sup>30</sup> (my trans.; Ibid.). Pimpinela’s quote suggests that even with a mask over his face, the audience intuitively knew that he was gay, alluding to his interpretation of his own performances as inherently queer. Yet this quote also suggests a gendering of the wrestling mask itself. Some of the greatest wrestlers in Mexican history, such as El Santo, wore a mask, which Anne Rubenstein explains “can be a mark of a real man,” (571). If the mask has a ‘masculine gender,’ or indicates the status of a ‘real’ man, an *exótico*’s choice to wrestle without a mask aligns with the *exótico*’s refusal to perform hegemonic masculinity, or any single gender identity.

While non-*exótico* wrestlers can wear a mask to portray themselves as invulnerable, impenetrable, stoic, and ultimately masculine, *exóticos* who wrestle maskless by comparison appear as vulnerable, open, expressive, and feminine, especially with the added makeup and hair styles. The refusal of the mask thus allows *exóticos* to exploit the performances of their masculine, non-*exótico* counterparts by establishing themselves as different and making themselves the more emotionally expressive, visible, and available of the two. These relationships between masculinity, femininity, and their associated

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<sup>30</sup> “Ya que la máscara tiene para Pimpinela un género masculino, y el público li confrontaba por ser *joto*, tuvo que desenmascararse... Dicho acto ha permitido que este luchador ‘salga *joteando*, como *exótico*’” (Hoechtel, “Lucha Libre” 241).

stereotypes mapped onto the mask expose the presence of hegemonic gender relations embedded within Mexico and the culture of *lucha libre*.

The binary dynamic of gender categories has historically gained traction among Mexican authors and cultural critics such as Octavio Paz, who in the 1950s expanded on the masculine-feminine binary to draw parallels with the region's experience of Spanish colonization and sexual violence. He describes a resulting contemporary Mexican attitude of *chingar o ser chingado* ("fuck or be fucked"), of being the aggressor or being the victim (Paz, *El Laberinto* 101-102). The verb 'chingar' itself is described as a verb of masculine, penetrative violence against the feminine *chingada*. While the masculine 'macho' is the 'Gran Chingón' ("Big Fucker") who embodies aggression, impassivity, invulnerability, violence, and power, women represent his complement through vulnerability, passivity, weakness, and victimization (Paz, *El Laberinto* 105-110). Though Paz's application of these models to the Mexican national identity may reinforce the perception of these dynamics, his writing has also served as a point of departure for interrogating these binaries and questioning their embedded misogyny.

Paz makes an explicit connection with the symbol of the mask in his essay "*Máscaras mexicanas*" ("Mexican Masks"), claiming that "the Mexican, whether young or old, criollo or mestizo, general or laborer or lawyer, seems to me to be a person who shuts himself away to protect himself: his face is a mask and so is his smile" (29). He continues the gendering of masking to Mexican culture, explaining that even Mexican attitudes and speech patterns seek to provide protection from the outside world: "the ideal of manliness is never to 'crack,' never to back down. Those who 'open themselves up' are cowards" (Paz, "Mexican Masks" 29-30). While Paz equates masculinity with being closed

off, he explains that this cultural logic positions women as “inferior beings because, in submitting, they open themselves up. Their inferiority is constitutional and resides in their sex, their submissiveness, which is a wound that never heals” (“Mexican Masks” 30).

Though this model certainly reflects misogynistic attitudes and generalizations of Mexican national culture, Paz’s approach has resonated with many and has been extended to explain other models of gender and sexual relations. Tomás Almaguer (1991) identifies a similar dynamic in sexual relations between men, which he describes as ‘*activo-pasivo*’ (“active-passive”). He explains that the active-passive model affixes the label of ‘homosexual’ only to the *pasivo* (“passive”) man in a sexual encounter, generating stigma for those men who play a more subservient, feminine role (78). Salvador Vidal-Ortiz et al. argue that these attitudes may sustain what they describe as “circum-Mediterranean constructions of male honor and female shame,” and can also reinforce the foundation for hierarchical heterosexual and homosexual relationships in Mexico (254). Rather than assuming that these binaries of masculine-feminine and activo-pasivo describe the entirety of all Mexicans’ experiences with gender and sexuality, they suggest that these binaries provide an important starting point for conversations about gendered and sexual inequalities (Ibid.).

Despite the potential dangers of these models, binary frameworks continue to shape conversations about gender and sexuality within the Mexican social imaginary (Rocha Osornio 268). Paz’s insistence on the complementarity of masculinity and femininity through binaries such as invulnerable-vulnerable, aggressive-passive, closed-open, strong-weak, and superior-inferior, feeds into Raewyn Connell’s (1995) description of systems of hegemonic gender relations that are founded on the complementarity of masculinity and



femininity. As James Messerschmidt explains, gender and sexual hegemony “intersect so that both masculinity and heterosexuality are deemed superior, and femininity and homosexuality (and alternative sexualities) are judged to be inferior” (54). This reinforces “the social construction of men and women as naturally different, complementary, and hierarchical” (Ibid.). Paz’s description of the binary nature of masculinity and femininity, then, resonates with broader models of hegemonic gender relations in which masculine ascendancy and feminine inferiority, as well as the correctness of heterosexuality, are assumed, reinforced, and naturalized.

By embracing the openness, vulnerability, and femininity generated within the masked-unmasked, masculine-feminine dynamic, *exóticos* exploit the symbolic potential of these binaries to create characters that are both emotionally and aesthetically appealing, while contesting the subordination of femininity and homosexuality. As Ximena Rojo de la Vega Guinea (113) and Tabea Huth contend (281), *exóticos* replace the traditional *luchador*’s mask with makeup. Raymunda, a mid-career *exótico*, explains that while 15% of *exóticos* use a mask, for the majority of *exóticos*, their makeup is their mask, making a wrestling mask unnecessary. Diamantina even argues that the mask strips the *exótico* character of its flavor, because beyond obscuring their beauty, the mask hides their facial expressions, reactions, and movements, keeping everything trapped inside. For this reason, Diamantina argues that *exóticos* should wrestle without masks, which allows them to be uninhibited, unrestricted, and free to show their personalities to the public.

In describing *exótico* Ruby Gardenia’s transformation in preparation for a *lucha libre* match, Huth cites her interview with Fernando Covarrubias (a.k.a. Ruby Gardenia):

con el maquillaje puesto [Ruby] se convierte en un súper héroe ambiguo, que incluso logra transgredir los límites impuestos a los hombres gays. El

maquillaje justifica los besos prohibidos y le permite el acceso a los corazones del público. Y, al mismo tiempo, Ruby le permite al público acceder a su misma cara: al dolor, al sex appeal y a las emociones. En cierto sentido, los *exóticos* toman un riesgo personal más alto que los enmascarados: venden su imagen y permiten al público utilizarlo como área de proyección... (281-284)

with the makeup on, [Ruby] becomes an ambiguous superhero, who even manages to transgress the limits placed on gay men. The makeup justifies the prohibited kisses and grants access to the hearts of the public. At the same time, Ruby allows the public to access her face: her pain, sex appeal, and emotions. In a certain sense, *exóticos* take a bigger personal risk than masked wrestlers: they sell their image and allow the public to use it as projection space... (my trans.; 281-284)

Ruby thus sacrifices her privacy in order to build stronger emotional connections with audiences, who might project negative thoughts, attitudes, or emotions onto her. Conversely, this exposure may also offer her the audience's support and devotion.

As Roberto Guillén explains in *Lentejuelas y Sangre*—one of the few volumes dedicated to *exótico* wrestling—*exóticos* do not use the mask because they don't need it (page n/a). *Exóticos* remove the mask of hypocrisy and double standards, and perhaps, without even wanting or intending to, are the precursors in Mexico to homosexual visibility, the gay manifestations and protests, and pride for sexual dissidence (Ibid.). Just as Ruby Gardenia is vulnerable to audiences' projections of biases without the mask, Guillén argues that *exóticos'* decisions to show their faces also allow them to represent queer identities in the public sphere. Rasputin, a young Oaxacan *exótico*, equates this choice with gay pride, explaining that *exóticos* choose to wrestle maskless because they have nothing to hide.

Yet as the *exótico* category grows, and along with it a growing number of wrestlers who represent queer identities, younger generations are beginning to reconsider their use of the mask and the utility of hiding their faces to create more dramatic characters, and

some are even turning to the mask as a way of standing out from other *exóticos*. When I began recruiting participants for this study, I came across a handful of *exóticos* (roughly 5 out of the 65 that I contacted) who do wear masks. Their masks varied from the traditional style of mask that covers the entire head, typically leaving the eyes, nose, and mouth exposed; to smaller masks that cover only a portion of the face, such as the mouth or the eyes. Bizhota is one such *exótico*, whose mask allows him to do elaborate eye makeup while covering the lower half of his face. Bizhota uses the mask as an opportunity to incorporate very deliberate symbolism into his costume by including a pride flag and adding a “β” symbol to represent his name and his passion for math. Rasputin similarly uses a mask in his character design. His hot pink and violet *antifaz* (“eye mask”) shows a golden R written on top, similarly incorporating a type of logo, while adding to what he describes as the spiritual, magical element of his character.

Lady Arcoiris, on the other hand, wears a more traditional mask. His mask covers his entire head, catching the light with hot pink, holographic material forming a shining heart with silver wings above his forehead.<sup>31</sup> While following more traditional masking designs that include cutouts for his eyes and nose, the prominent pink heart would not likely be seen on a typical masculine wrestler’s mask. When he removed his mask to show me the design up close, he turned the mask over to reveal the blood and sweat stains that traced the edges of the eye and mouth openings. The mask featured small tears and bunches in the elastic material, hinting at the battles the mask has endured on its owner’s face. Though his mask is certainly unique, Lady Arcoiris shares that he has faced criticism in the past for wearing a mask:

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<sup>31</sup> See Figure 8.

Entonces, siempre es la crítica de que ‘Si eres exótico, ¿por qué usas máscara?’ y ‘¿Por qué no te la quitas?’ y... ‘A lo mejor estás bien feo. Por eso usas máscara.’ Y yo como, ‘Sí, estoy un poquito. Pero nomás poquito’ [ríe]. Sí he recibido muchas críticas, pero al final del día, me siento yo muy cómodo, me siento bien con la máscara.

So, there’s always the criticism of ‘If you’re an *exótico*, why do you wear a mask?’ and ‘Why don’t you take it off?’ and... ‘Maybe it’s because you’re really ugly. That’s why you use a mask.’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, I am a little. But just a little’ [he laughs]. Yeah, I’ve received a lot of critiques, but at the end of the day, I feel really comfortable, I feel good with the mask.

Though he feels empowered by his mask, Lady Arcoiris also mentioned that wearing the mask prevents him from connecting with the public. Unmasked *exóticos* can be recognized by fans in public, but Lady Arcoiris is unidentifiable without his mask. The mask therefore prevents Lady Arcoiris from being recognized in the same way as his *exótico* peers, but he alongside his other peers are now beginning to question how the *exótico* category can represent itself.



Figure 8. Lady Arcoiris’s Mask, taken by Catherine Prechtel, 2022.

While the mask does not align with the traditional *exótico* character, current masked *exóticos* have found other ways to add what El Demasiado calls ‘a touch of homosexuality’ to their mask designs by using pride flags and rainbows, ensuring that the queer nature of the *exótico* is not lost on audiences. Beyond including the mask to enrich their characters, masked *exóticos* also subvert the mask’s gendered symbolism. Their use of a traditionally masculine element within their own queer-performing characters allows *exóticos* to symbolically pry the mask away from hegemonic masculinity. Thus, even with a traditionally gendered symbol such as the mask that separates masculinity and femininity along the lines of open-closed and vulnerable-impenetrable, *exóticos* performatively undermine the stability of these binaries.

### ***Exótico R/evolution: Shifting Models of the Exótico Character***

Though the *exótico* character has changed over the years, the core has remained relatively stable: *exóticos* include performances of femininity and masculinity, delicacy and strength, and frequently deploy stereotypes of homosexuality, with each wrestler adding their own touch to the character. While the *exóticos* certainly have taken creative liberties with each iteration of their characters, the first *exóticos* drew from the culturally relevant figure of the ‘dandy,’ which quickly established the *exótico*’s effeminacy and proximity to homosexuality. However, the performed queerness of this character has morphed over the years, evolving from a dandy or metrosexual archetype performed by Dizzy Gardenia Davis and later Sergio el Hermoso and El Bello Greco, to the performances of homosexuality by May Flower, Pimpinela Escarlata, and Rudy Reyna starting in the 1980s and 1990s, and now, to what younger *exóticos* today describe as a shift towards a

tougher, more rock ‘n’ roll *exótico*. Though each *exótico* has a unique interpretation of their character, and the category certainly is not monolithic, the ways that *exóticos* describe and potentially contest the evolution of their category reveal their underlying understandings of who and what an *exótico* is.

### *Reviving the Dandy*

In 1901, Mexico City police raided a party of queer Mexican individuals and arrested 41 men, many of whom were men wearing feminine attire (Monsiváis 147). The ensuing scandal of the *Baile de los 41* (“Dance of the 41”), also referred to as the *Gran Redada* (“Great Raid”), has been described by Carlos Monsiváis as the discursive invention of homosexuality in Mexico (164), marking a moment in which representations of homosexuality and feminine men suddenly emerged in Mexican press and media. Because many of the 41 men who were arrested were of the upper classes, this moment also laid the groundwork for the villainization of the figure of the effeminate, aristocratic dandy. These events strengthened cultural associations between femininity, homosexuality, and bourgeois subjectivities, which spurred a surge in penny press journalism that launched public attacks against the figure of the Mexican dandy (Irwin et al. 2003; Buffington 195). While the dandy had previously represented the taste and luxury of the ruling classes of Mexico during the Porfiriato dictatorship, serving “as a symbol of civilization, modernization, and even patriotism for Mexican upper classes of the era,” events such as the *Baile de los 41* and the ensuing pivot in press coverage contributed to the conversion of the dandy into a “symbol of bourgeois corruption,” sexual deviance, male effeminacy, and decadence for Mexico’s incipient revolutionary forces (Irwin et al. 12). In the ensuing

decades, the image of the dandy continued to evolve, becoming a more villainized, mockable figure.

Several decades later, when *exóticos* began to enter the Mexican *lucha libre* arena, the figure of the dandy suddenly regained traction through the character of the *exótico*.<sup>32</sup> Janina Möbius argues that “manifestations of the figure of the dandy had more to do with ‘fantasías,’ or with the real existence of eccentrics from Mexico City’s bourgeois class during the 1950s”<sup>33</sup> (my trans.; 357). Later on in the 1970s, as *lucha libre* came to be directed more explicitly towards its popular and working-class target audiences, Möbius argues that “the dandy turned into the type of *exótico* with the characteristics of the effeminate homosexual, of *la loca* [“the crazy woman,” also used to describe effeminate gay men]”<sup>34</sup> (my trans.; 357).

The *exótico* revival of the dandy figure from the earlier part of the 20th century, then, responds to the changing audiences of *lucha libre*. Möbius expands this description of the dandy aspect within *exótico* wrestling, explaining that what were primarily interpreted as displays of elegance came to connote femininity over time, characterizing *exóticos* as non-masculine men, as *jotos* (357). These shifts reflect not only the attitudes of the public, but also the *exóticos*’ capability to adapt to the attitudes of audiences over the

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<sup>32</sup> While at once establishing a history of effeminacy among Mexican men, the villainization of the dandy figure also resonates with many descriptions by *exóticos* and scholars alike who argue that *exóticos* historically have wrestled as *rudos* (Levi *World* 156), who are described as rule breakers and occasionally as villains, but often receive the support of the pro-rudo audience members. *Exóticos*, then, harness what Levi describes as the ‘paradoxical’ space that they occupy (Ibid.), embracing the aspects that could be interpreted as negative or villainizing, and using them to drive their popularity with audiences and fuel their careers.

<sup>33</sup> “manifestaciones de la figura del dandy tenían que ver más con ‘fantasías’, o con la existencia real de excéntricos de la clase burguesa de la ciudad de México en los años cincuenta,” (Möbius 357).

<sup>34</sup> “mientras que a partir de los setenta la lucha libre está dirigida de manera explícita a los habitantes de las colonias populares. Para adecuarse a su público-objetivo, el dandy se convirtió en el tipo del *exótico* con las características de la figura del homosexual afeminado, de la ‘loca’, extendida sobre todo en el medio obrero” (Möbius 357).

decades, as well as their ability to exploit the resonance of the increasingly salient figure of *la loca*. As a slang term used to describe homosexual men who perform femininity in Mexico (Möbius 381), *loca* points to the subsequent stages of the evolution of the *exótico*, creating a throughline that connects *exóticos* to the history of men performing femininity throughout Mexican history.

*From Metrosexual Dandy to Gay*

As May Flower arrived for our interview, I was struck by his warmth and generosity. His long, platinum hair was swept back over his head, the loose curls flowing down his back, conjuring images of his glamorous hair and golden costumes over the years. His large, dark eyes glittered mischievously as he began to share his life story. Though he remains a beacon of the *exótico* category, he certainly had no airs of superiority as he kindly explained basic concepts and the history of *la lucha exótica* (“*exótico* wrestling”).

He excitedly ate his salad as he mused over the future of his career, his activism, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, explaining that he had been forced to seek employment outside of *lucha libre* for the first time in decades. Like many *luchadores* during the pandemic, the suspension of large events had prompted *luchadores* to consider other career options like the food industry, sanitation, public works, and other customer service options (Linthicum). At almost 60 years of age, he now began to consider how much longer his body would withstand the physical toll of *lucha libre*. Though such changes must have been difficult, he cheerfully explained that he had been working in other industries to supplement his income.



It's difficult to imagine such skilled performers being forced to start from scratch in other fields, especially given the impact that *luchadores* like May Flower have had in shaping the trajectory of *lucha libre*. May Flower claims that his and Pimpinela Escarlata's role in defining the *exótico* category began in 1991, a few years after their individual debuts in the late 1980s. Up until this point, Polvo de Estrellas explains, "the *exóticos* weren't gay. They were men, I don't know, just common men." He adds, "I mean, before, the *exóticos* were men. They had families, and children, and they were just doing the act... But now, for the last twenty or thirty years, they're gay."<sup>35</sup> As Polvo de Estrellas indicates, there was a pivot in the *exótico* category towards being explicitly gay, and May Flower proudly describes his role in bringing that change to fruition.

Prior to this moment, *exóticos* had performed their characters in a more restrained, conservative way, leading many *exóticos* today to label them as 'metrosexual.' As Arnulfo Vigil explains, the first 'homosexual' *luchador* in Mexico wasn't homosexual or Mexican—he was the North American wrestler George Wagner, who wrestled as Gorgeous George (Cavazos Torres 9). As the first iteration of the *exótico* character, Gorgeous George paved the way for *exóticos* like Dizzy Gardenia Davis in the 1950s, who "played a role closer to that of dandy than drag queen" (Levi "Masked Media" 357). Bastida Aguilar and Cruz Ortega add that this character of the *dandi* ("dandy") had refined and delicate tastes, coming from the bourgeoisie and high society (31). The dandy metrosexual certainly exuded glamor, but the *exótico* Ruby Gardenia explains that these metrosexual *exóticos* would typically be more masculine than today's *exóticos*, entering the wrestling ring

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<sup>35</sup> "...los exóticos no eran gays. Eran hombres, cómo, no sé, corrientes...O sea, antes, los exóticos eran hombres. Tenían familia, e hijos, y nomás andaban allí haciendo la faramalla [inaudible]...Pues, ahorita en la actualidad, de veinte años para acá, treinta, son gays."

shirtless, showing the hairs on their chest, and projecting a more heterosexual and less overtly feminized image than the *exóticos* of today.

While these metrosexual *exóticos* would wrestle shirtless or with simpler costumes, they would typically wear more extravagant capes and robes while walking up to the ring, sporting satin, animal prints, or floral patterns. These *exóticos* would have personal valets who helped style their hair and spray cologne both in the ring and on the audience, conjuring images of an elegant aristocrat (Hoechtl “Lucha Libre” 227). The pampering and perfuming of *exóticos* by their assistants contributed to the spectacle of the elegant *exóticos*, but many accounts of *exóticos* like Gardenia Davis point out that “the audiences were very bothered by these episodes, so they booed and insulted [them]... Such prima donna behavior served to further infuriate fans” (Rojo de la Vega Guinea 114). Early *exóticos* thus subverted gendered expectations and resisted normative performances of masculinity, and even when they faced volatile reactions from audiences, the drama they created was memorable enough to keep them employed.

Because of the glamor and elegance of these *exóticos*, Princeso explains that the metrosexual wrestler was someone “who cares for their brand, their image. Who must always look good, who must always smell good.”<sup>36</sup> These *exóticos* actively cultivated their public image, asserting themselves as dandies and metrosexuals, but still not explicitly gay. Yuriko even goes so far as to argue that because these metrosexual *exóticos* weren’t openly gay, they were “elegant luchadores, but not *exóticos*,”<sup>37</sup> solidifying his statement that a *real exótico* is gay. While many debate the sexual orientation of these metrosexual *exóticos*, they represent what Hoechtl terms ‘prequeer,’ because of the ambiguity that they created

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<sup>36</sup> “que cuida su este, su estampa. Que siempre se tiene que ver bien, que siempre tiene que oler bien.”

<sup>37</sup> “eran luchadores elegantes, pero no exóticos.”

through their gender performances (“Lucha Libre” 228). While they did not explicitly adopt the label of ‘homosexual,’ these prequeer *exóticos* certainly departed from performances of hegemonic masculinity enough to establish the norm within the *exótico* category.

Over the years, *exóticos* continued to refine their styles, resulting in the metrosexual wrestlers of the 1970s who began teaming up, including famous duos like Sergio el Hermoso and El Bello Greco (Rojo de la Vega Guinea 114). These *exóticos* found great success during the 1970s, which:

bothered most of the lucha libre press (including *Box y lucha*, a famous periodical) who were scandalized by such displays of queer identity. In 1978, *Lucha Libre* magazine featured an article, ‘¡Basta ya de jotos!’ (‘Enough with the fags!’), written by a scandalized lucha libre expert who argued that *exóticos* have made a circus out of that sport and, he states with disgust, they even kiss each other and dress in women’s clothes. (Ibid.)

While these *exóticos* may not have seemed as aristocratic as the very first *exóticos*, neither were they explicitly gay; the media may have called them ‘*jotos*’ and decried their femininity, but these *exóticos* tended to insist that these were just their characters, and nothing more. These duos were later followed by Rudy Reyna, Pimpinela Escarlata, and May Flower (Rojo de la Vega Guinea 114). While Heather Levi points out that Rudy Reynosa (Reyna) had already begun to make his own contributions to the character by chasing his opponents around the ring with kisses and flirtatious gestures, he maintained that his style was just an act; ultimately, it was Pimpinela Escarlata and May Flower who embraced a gay identity after their debut (Levi *World* 154).

As May Flower describes it, on January 9 of 1991, in Arena Querétaro, their team created “something magical, which, I only realized today, because it’s the birth of

homosexuality within *lucha libre*.”<sup>38</sup> When they arrived at the venue, Rudy Reyna was the more established *exótico* who led their trio. May Flower describes Rudy as more hesitant to perform as openly gay, and he had warned his teammates that they might not be able to wear makeup and lingerie like they had originally planned. Despite Rudy’s concerns, Pimpinela and May Flower continued with their planned costumes, pulling on their tights, garters, and revealing bathing suits. When Rudy Reyna entered the ring, the audience recognized him and cheered; when May Flower and Pimpinela entered the ring, the audience fell silent. “Oh, how ugly, how horrible that feels!”<sup>39</sup> May Flowers recounts:

Nosotros caminando por el pasillo rumbo al ring, y la gente callada, como diciendo ‘¿Qué onda con estos travestis?’ Nos subimos al ring, nos presentaron, la gente alcanzaba a reaccionar. Cuando empezamos a luchar, la gente se volvía loca. La gente se volvía loca. Fue algo inolvidable para nosotros—o sea, se me pone la piel chinita acordarme—de que terminamos de luchar, y la gente parada aplaudiendo. La gente parada aplaudiendo, aventándonos dinero al ring. Aventándonos dinero en nuestra primera lucha...

We were walking down the path to the ring, and the people were silent, as if they were saying ‘What’s up with those *travestis*?’ We climbed into the ring, we presented ourselves, and the people managed to react. When we began to wrestle, the people went crazy. They went crazy. It was unforgettable for us—I mean, I get goosebumps just thinking about it—when we finished wrestling, the people were giving a standing ovation. They stood up, applauding, throwing money into the ring. Throwing us money in our first fight...

The contributions that May Flower, Pimpinela Escarlata, and Rudy Reyna made to the *exótico* category were therefore a success. They represented a key shift in *exótico* wrestling, Heather Levi contends, because “unlike their predecessors, they publicly embraced a gay identity. They made it clear in interviews that they were gay, and that in playing the role

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<sup>38</sup> “Algo mágico, y hasta hoy me doy cuenta. Porque es el nacimiento de la homosexualidad dentro de la lucha libre”

<sup>39</sup> “Ay, qué feo se siente, ¡qué horrible se siente eso!”

of exótico, they were doing what came to them ‘naturally’” (Levi “Masked Media” 357). The boldly effeminate, cross-dressing, *travesti exótico* was there to stay, and the trio began to tour the country as they grew in popularity.

Bastida Aguilar and Cruz Ortega explain that these changes in the 1980s and 1990s generated a parallel between being *exótico* and being gay, in which the appearance of these new *exóticos* established the trend of being more open about their sexual orientations (36). They argue that this also pressured gay *luchadores* to *salir del clóset* (“come out of the closet”) and leave their ‘traditional’ *luchador* characters behind to become *exóticos* (Ibid.). This trend has become so well-established, in fact, that being a gay *luchador* who *doesn’t* wrestle as an *exótico* feels like a contradiction, especially in the eyes of the public (Bastida Aguilar and Cruz Ortega 38). Yet this emphasis on embracing gay personalities did not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it echoes the concurrent pushes for LGBTTTTI rights in Mexico.

While homosexual acts have not been illegal in Mexico since the nineteenth century, Rafael De la Dehesa explains that Mexico’s Penal Codes of 1871, 1929, and 1931 used the concept of ‘Violation of Public Morals and Good Customs’ to describe ‘obscene’ behaviors and criminalize social scripts that departed from prescribed gender norms (30-40). By the 1970s, however, Mexico began to experience one of the largest LGBT movements in the region (De la Dehesa 2). These activist efforts have accomplished landmark measures such as the approval of the *Ley Federal para Prevenir y Eliminar la Discriminación* (“The Federal Law to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination”) in 2003, and the *Ley de Sociedades de Convivencia en el D.F.* (“Law of Coexistence Societies in the Federal District”) in 2007, both of which aim to combat discrimination and protect civil

unions (Rocha Osornio 272). The emergence of openly gay *exóticos* in the 1980s and 1990s, then, echoes the broader changes in Mexican society, and allowed *exóticos* like May Flower to draw from the growing momentum of this movement.

Given the impact of May Flower, Rudy Reyna, and Pimpinela Escarlata, the convergence of the *exótico* category with publicly gay identities seems undeniable. As Lady Arcoiris explains, while the metrosexuals constituted the first wave of *exótico* wrestling, May Flower and his peers brought about the second phase of the *exótico*. As La Chona, a heterosexual *exótico* who has performed his character for several decades, puts it, “they were already more a part of the gay *ambiente*, no?”<sup>40</sup> What before was described as a ‘metrosexual’ character—which Lady Arcoiris described as elegant, fashionable, and vain—now began to wear makeup, grow longer hair, and incorporate more brilliant clothing.

As El Demasiado explains, Pimpinela Escarlata, along with May Flower and Cassandro, extended the *exótico* from a character who:

tenían ademanes, tenían gestos, y tenían su forma de caminar. Pero no utilizaban ni leotardos, ni trajes de baño. No utilizaban, este, maquillaje en la cara. Era imposible ver un luchador que era así, hasta que llegaron ellos. Y todo eso que impuso Pimpi. Muchos compañeros hacían generación tras generación, tras generación, utilizando los mismos recursos, ¿no? Utilizando el mismo tipo de traje, que es un traje de baño, botas y el pelo teñido de algún color.

had *ademanes*, had gestures, and had his way of walking. But they didn’t use leotards or bathing suits. They didn’t wear makeup on their faces. It was impossible to see a *luchador* like that, until they came. And Pimpi started all of it. Many [*exóticos*] had, generation after generation, been using the same resources, no? Using the same type of suit, which was a bathing suit, boots, and their hair dyed a certain color.

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<sup>40</sup> “...pues eran más así del ambiente gay, ¿no?”

The use of makeup therefore marks a generational shift; many *exóticos* who began their careers after the late 1980s and early 1990s wear eye makeup and are more likely to wear lipstick today. Sexy Flama signals this shift, explaining that while El Bello Greco never wore makeup, it has become so commonplace among today's *exóticos* that it's one of the key ways that audiences identify and evaluate an *exótico*.

Beyond costume and makeup design, one of the most visible changes in the *exótico* character was the incorporation of the *beso* ("kiss"). "The first *exóticos*," explains Rojo de la Vega Guinea, "did not kiss their opponents, but rather sprayed them with perfume; decades later, direct contact became the norm" (118). Emerging alongside Rudy Reyna, May Flower, and Pimpinela Escarlata, the *beso* grew in popularity as an *exótico* strategy to distract and disarm their opponents (Huth 280). According to El Demasiado, the metrosexual *exóticos* would never have kissed his opponents, but Pimpinela Escarlata pushed a lot of trends such as the *beso*, which has now become a staple move among *exóticos* and expected (or even demanded) by audiences.

While the metrosexual model of the *exótico* gave way to the second wave of *exóticos* who introduced the birth of homosexuality in *lucha libre*, the *exótico* character did not stop there. Wendy Gaviota argues that the character of the *exótico* has continued to evolve drastically after the changes brought by Pimpinela Escarlata and May Flower: "...we could be ourselves, being like the fourth or fifth generation, where we came to innovate the rhinestones on the suits, the eyelashes, the feathers in the headdresses, the robes with feathers. I mean, we added more spice to *lucha libre*."<sup>41</sup> Yet the evolution of *exótico* fashion

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<sup>41</sup> "...podríamos ser nosotros, que venimos siendo, como, pon tú la cuarta o la quinta generación, donde venimos a innovar la pedrería de los trajes, las pestañas, las plumas en los penachos, las batas con pluma. O sea, más, como que le metimos más, cómo dices, como el picante más a la lucha libre."

did not stop there. While some *exóticos* turned towards the look that Wendy describes as ‘tropical,’ others have moved towards an edgier rock ‘n’ roll look, which Bizhota describes as using leather, spikes, and crowns, creating a darker pop rock look that leaves the tropical, carnival-inspired aesthetic behind. The continued proliferation of styles might therefore resist a categorization of *exóticos* based on their individual tastes, but the *estilo exótico* still has room for creativity and individuality, so long as *exóticos* sustain their gay personalities.

While the trends established by Pimpinela Escarlata, May Flower, and Rudy Reyna now serve as the most recognized standard for *exótico* characters, this does not come without contention or debate over exactly how an *exótico* should look or behave. The changes in *exótico* character design over the years become evident in the stylistic changes made between the generational iterations of the *exótico* character ‘Cariñoso.’ Cariñoso Jr.’s father (the original ‘Cariñoso’) wrestled as an *exótico* and had passed his character to his son when he began training as a *luchador exótico*. While many of the elements of the character have remained the same, the father and son differ in their approach to makeup. Though Cariñoso (senior) sported a simple pink costume with a pink bathrobe, he never wore makeup beyond curling his eyelashes. Cariñoso Jr., on the other hand, is more comfortable applying makeup, and shares a conversation he had with his father about the character design for the ‘Cariñoso’ legacy:

Entonces cuando yo empiezo a maquillarme, mi papá me dice ‘¿Pero por qué? ¿Pero por qué te maquillas?’ ‘Pues, porque le quiero dar mi plus, le quiero dar mi estilo, le quiero dar mi propia vida a tu nombre, ¿no?’ ‘Pero es que para ser exótico, no necesitas maquillarte, no necesitas tanta producción. Con el simple hecho de saberlo trabajar, con el simple hecho de saberte mover arriba de un ring, por el simple hecho de que a la gente le guste, con eso. Con eso, es más que suficiente.’

So when I start to wear makeup, my dad says ‘But why? Why do you put on makeup?’ ‘Well, because I want to give it my *plus*, I want to give it my



style. I want to give your name my own life, no?’ ‘But to be an *exótico*, you don’t need to wear makeup, you don’t need so much production. With just knowing how to work it, with just being able to know how to move up in the ring, with the simple fact of being liked by the people, that’s it. That’s more than enough.’

For Cariñoso (senior), the *exótico*’s power lies in their ability to perform the character; makeup is unnecessary if the wrestler is talented and charismatic enough. For Cariñoso Jr., however, his father’s attitudes towards makeup seem somewhat antiquated, though the two were able to come to a mutual understanding of how to continue the character’s evolution. This conversation highlights the development of the *exótico* character: even as time has allowed for varying performances of femininity and personal styles, the *exótico* character has remained focused on maintaining the gay personality.

### **Establishing Authenticity**

Given the diversity of their category and the constant shifting of styles and performances, how do *exóticos* draw boundaries between who is and is not an *exótico*? *Exóticos* discursively deploy *exótico* normativity to evaluate the authenticity of their peers. While doing so can allow *exóticos* to define the *estilo exótico* regarding character design, costumes, and wrestling styles, *exótico* normativity also reveals broader attitudes towards gender identity and sexual orientation within the category. Engaging in these discussions therefore allows *exóticos* to establish themselves as ‘authentic’ or ‘correct’ representatives of the category. This normativity becomes particularly salient in discussions of *exóticos*’ sexual orientations, which affirms the centrality of performing gayness as a cornerstone of the *exótico* character.

*Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*

Though *exóticos* have established that they play a gay character, for many this performance is just that: a performance. Being an *exótico* does not require the *luchadores* to live out the character in their daily lives; rather, they need only play the character convincingly when up in the ring. But if not all *exóticos* are men, what does this mean for *exóticas*? Trans *exóticas* such as Wendy Gaviota and Estrella Divina certainly contest the model of the *exótico* as a gay man, but as a minority within the *exótico* category, they have been treated as an exception, with scant attention paid to their needs and rights as trans women, *not* gay men.

As Estrella Divina explains in an Instagram post, “At one point *La Lucha Exótica* was represented by cisgender men doing an *amanerado* and elegant CHARACTER... After that, came a BOOM in the *Lucha Libre* and the *Travestismo*-turned-*Lucha* arrived [sic] a generation of real *Luchadores Exóticos*...”<sup>42</sup> (my trans.). She goes on to describe how in the past, being gay and LGBTTTI was viewed poorly in some parts, and there was still much homophobia in the sport. Some years ago, she explains, the generation of transgender women arrived, which “unfortunately is encompassed within the term *exóticos*, given... the lack of culture and the lack of education...”<sup>43</sup> (my trans.; Estrella Divina). Today, she adds, people have been educating themselves, and little by little, they have been accepting of the new generations of *exóticas*. She proudly adds that she is pleased to see the new faces following in her footsteps who will be recognized as *exóticas* or as trans

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<sup>42</sup> “En algún momento La Lucha Libre exótica Fue representada por Hombres Cisgeneros [sic] Haciendo un PERSONAJE Amanerado y Elegante... Después vino un BOOM en la Lucha Libre y llegó el Travestismo Vuelto Lucha una generación de Luchadores Exóticos...” (Estrella Divina).

<sup>43</sup> “lamentablemente se engloba en El termino [sic] exóticos puesto que la falta de cultura y la Falta de educación así es...” (Estrella Divina)

women instead of *exóticos* as they create visibility and open safe spaces free of *machista* (“sexist”), misogynistic, or transphobic comments.

As will be discussed in future chapters, Wendy Gaviota and Estrella Divina both advocate for the recognition of their gender identities within the *exótico* category, pushing back against those who would incorrectly treat them as gay men. Wendy Gaviota explains that “I am a trans girl, in *lucha libre*, or an ‘*exótica*’ in *lucha libre*.’ An ‘*exótico*’ is not the same thing as an ‘*exótica*.’”<sup>44</sup> Wendy has frequently had to explain this difference. Rojo de la Vega Guinea explains that while Wendy Gaviota is a trans woman who wrestles with men, many of her fans still think of her as a man, and though she does not align with the *exótico* category based on her gender identity, “because she is queer and other,’ she is considered an *exótico*” (117). Through both Wendy Gaviota and Estrella Divina’s descriptions of the connection between *exóticas* and *exóticos*, it becomes clear that the subsuming of *exóticas* into the *exótico* category may come to an end as they gain momentum for greater recognition of their gender within *lucha libre*.

Though the question of gender identity and gender performance certainly shapes the *exótico* category and their interactions with normative conceptions of gender and sexuality, *exóticos* rarely discussed the presence or inclusion of trans *exóticas* in their interviews. Instead of exploring belonging to the *exótico* category along the axis of gender, *exóticos* tended to gravitate towards the tension between *exóticos* with diverse sexual orientations. The tension within this discussion originates from what *exóticos* framed as a heterosexual-homosexual binary—overstepping any discussions of bisexuality or sexual fluidity—and the legacy of heterosexual wrestlers in the *exótico* category.

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<sup>44</sup> “‘Soy una niña trans, en la lucha libre, o una *exótica* en la lucha libre.’ Que no es lo mismo un *exótico* que una *exótica*.”

While *exóticos* like May Flower and Polvo de Estrellas emphasize that the *exótico* category is open to everyone, Ruby Gardenia questions the belonging of heterosexual *exóticos*. She attributes the prominence of heterosexual *exóticos* to the historic repression of homosexuality within *lucha libre*, even within the *exótico* category. Homophobia and transphobia paved the way for cisgender and heterosexual wrestlers to take up the *exótico* character because *promotores* (“promoters”) would be more comfortable hiring an *exótico* that they believed was heterosexual in their personal life and was only pretending to be gay. Similarly, Ruby points out that heterosexual *exóticos* often get their starts when they attend a *lucha libre* event and an *exótico* doesn’t show up. In these cases, coaches and *promotores* often encourage young *luchadores* (regardless of their sexual orientation) to try out the *exótico* character to fill that role for the night. For those who successfully wrestle as *exóticos* and create positive relationships with the audience, they may choose to stick with the character and pivot their careers. In fact, of the sixteen participants in this study, roughly one third described entering the *exótico* category this way; of those, nearly all of them identified openly as heterosexual.

Today, El Demasiado estimates that roughly 80% of *exóticos* are gay, while 20% identify as heterosexual, emphasizing that being gay is not a job requirement. There are several successful contemporary *exóticos* who claim heterosexual identities in public, including Máximo, who was married to and has children with the *luchadora* India Sioux.<sup>45</sup> Known for his one-armed leotards with a built-in skirt, his hot pink mohawk, and his coquettish smile, Máximo is also from a well-respected wrestling family and quickly rose

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<sup>45</sup> In 2022 India Sioux denounced Máximo for domestic violence (Valdés).

to fame after his debut in 2000.<sup>46</sup> Rojo de la Vega Guinea describes Máximo's relationship between his character and identity:

When Máximo is in the ring, he performs as an *exótico* flirting with men, grabbing and kissing them. Out of the ring, even if he is still dressed in his *exótico* clothes, he acts gallantly with the ladies; once I had the opportunity to talk to Máximo and he called me 'nena' (baby) and was very flirty. He has declared in interviews that he acts gay in the ring, and that it comes naturally, despite the fact that he is actually heterosexual. Acting out a sexual preference is a performative act, the same as wearing a mask or make-up in *lucha libre*. (116)

Máximo highlights an important element of 'being' an *exótico*: the *exótico* character's sexual preference is *performative*.



Figure 9 (left). Read Miller, Peter. "Maximo." Sports Illustrated.

Figure 10 (right). Arana Lucha Libre. Photo of Princeso published by Arana Lucha Libre, from Facebook.

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<sup>46</sup> See Figure 9.

While describing himself as a naturally convincing *exótico*, Máximo also takes steps to make his heterosexual identity explicit outside of the ring by flirting with women and discursively distancing himself from his *exótico* character. Nina Hoechtl affirms this phenomenon, reporting that Máximo frequently asserts that he is not homosexual, maintaining a distinction between himself and the *exóticos* who present themselves as queer role models (“Lucha Libre” 240). She argues that Máximo does not take advantage of his role as a highly successful *exótico* in order to become a role model; outside of the ring, he doesn’t want to be treated as an *exótico* or discuss the problems that affect gay *exóticos*, even as his performances call into question the cultural division between homosexual and heterosexual (Ibid.).

Dulce Gardenia, another well-known *exótico* who has recently wrestled as a regular with the *Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre*—and appeared to have taken Máximo’s spot within the league in 2021—is also publicly heterosexual and speaks of his children in interviews. Like Máximo and the metrosexual *exóticos* before him, Dulce Gardenia seems to offer his children as evidence of his public heterosexual identity, regardless of his private sexual identity or practices. Though queer *exóticos* can have children as well, the focus on children as evidence of heterosexuality allows these *exóticos* to align themselves symbolically and discursively with the image of a man who has biological children through heterosexual relationships with women.

While many *exóticos* cited Dulce Gardenia and Máximo as important *exóticos*, some expressed frustration with their prominence as heterosexual *exóticos*. Ruby Gardenia claims that it’s easy to identify an ‘innate’ *luchador exótico*, versus an *exótico* who is a *macho cabrón* (“bastard,” or an annoying or rude man), “who puts on our costumes, who

isn't worthy of wearing it, trying to imitate an identity, which is the identity of the *luchador exótico*.”<sup>47</sup> Ruby continues, asking “Why do you put on a feather, a wig, or dye your hair, or put on an image? That's transgressing my person, because I identify with what you're ridiculing.”<sup>48</sup> The conflation of the *exótico* character with a queer identity makes Ruby feel attacked. She continues, “So, I'm telling you, *luchadores exóticos* with a masculine identity... with a well-established masculine gender, and with a heterosexual... public-facing identity—I don't like it very much. And I'm never going to condone it, and I'm never going to support it, because it's transgressing an identity and an image that is alive and feels, the *vida exótica* [“*exótico* life”].”<sup>49</sup> Ruby later clarifies that a heterosexual can certainly play an *exótico*, but it must be done respectfully.

Bizhota echoes Ruby Gardenia's concerns about heterosexual *exóticos*' handling of the *exótico* character, explaining that *exóticos* who:

...somos de la comunidad, nos preocupamos mucho por la imagen, por meterle un maquillaje, por meterle un color. A veces estas personas solo se pintan el cabello, o una parte del cabello, o ya salen con lentes, o así... Y a veces ni siquiera sus vestuarios se lavan... Solo al final del día, siguen siendo hombres, que, pues, no se preocupan por la imagen. Un hombre nunca se preocupa por su imagen al 100%, nunca se preocupa por estar limpio, por hacer esas cosas.

...are from the community,<sup>50</sup> we care a lot about our image, about putting makeup on, about adding color. Sometimes these people only dye their hair, or a part of it, and go out with sunglasses, or something like that... And sometimes they don't even wash their costumes... But at the end of the day, they're still men, and they don't worry about the image. A man never

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<sup>47</sup> “...que se pone nuestro vestuario, que no es digno de portarlo, para tratar de igualar imitando una identidad, que es una identidad de luchador exótico.”

<sup>48</sup> “Por qué te pones una pluma, una peluca, o te pintas el cabello, ¿o te pones una imagen? Eso es transgredir mi persona, porque yo me identifico con lo que tú estás ridiculizando.”

<sup>49</sup> “Entonces, te digo, los luchadores exóticos con una identidad masculina...con un género masculino, bien establecido, y con una identidad... hacia el público... como un heterosexual—Yo no lo veo muy bien. Y nunca lo voy a consentir, y nunca lo voy a apoyar, porque es transgredir una orientación y una imagen de quién sí vive, siente, la vida exótica.”

<sup>50</sup> ‘Community,’ in this case refers to a queer community.

worries about his image 100%, he never worries about being clean, or doing those things.

Primarily, Bizhota expresses concern about heterosexual *exóticos* who don't cultivate their images. Their complacency frustrates Bizhota, who argues that *exóticos* 'from the community' have a desire to look good. "And that's what makes us different," Bizhota explains: "I don't agree much with those people, who, despite being very good *luchadores*, I think they should be in another style and not in the *exótico* [category]."<sup>51</sup> Like Ruby Gardenia, Bizhota expresses concern about the interpretation of the *exótico* character by *luchadores* who may or may not care about its image, or by those who they don't perceive as having any personal interests in protecting the category. Bizhota further explores the consequences of having heterosexual men play *exóticos*:

...no me molesta, pero sí no estoy tan, este, cómodo en el aspecto de que algunos luchadores que son heterosexuales, finjan un personaje exótico, porque luego, al fingirlo, lo hacen como en manera de burla, o bailan mucho, o nada más como... fingiendo algo que nos hace ver a nosotros como gays, como exóticos, como si fuéramos un payaso. Entonces, eso no me gusta... Creo que la lucha libre, en el aspecto exótico, solo deberían de ser exóticos las personas que en realidad pertenecen más a la comunidad, ¿no? Porque nos entendemos nosotros, porque sabemos que no somos el payaso de nadie. Y sabemos qué es—dónde nuestra preferencia quiere salir, o qué tenemos que llevar, también con nuestro personaje, que queremos ofrecerle al público...

...it doesn't bother me, but yeah, I'm not so, uh, comfortable in the aspect that some *luchadores* who are heterosexual, pretend to have an *exótico* character, because then, by pretending to do it, they do it in a mocking way, or they dance a lot, or just... acting out something that makes us gays, as *exóticos*, look like clowns. So I don't like that... And I believe that in *lucha libre*, regarding *exóticos*, only those who really belong more to the community should be *exóticos*, no? Because we understand each other, because we know that we're nobody's clowns. And we know what—where our [sexual] preference comes out, or what we have to wear, and the same with our character, that we want to offer to the public...

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<sup>51</sup> "Y es lo que nos hace diferentes, y por eso, que no estoy tan de acuerdo con que esas personas, a pesar de que son muy buenos luchadores, creo que deberían de estar en otro, este, en otro estilo y no en el exótico."



Though, like Ruby Gardenia, Bizhota recognizes that the *exótico* category is open to all sexual orientations, he brings up a crucial point: heterosexual *exóticos*' performances threaten to generate or reinforce negative stereotypes of homosexuality. Regardless of the intent of heterosexual *exóticos*, the concern expressed by queer *exóticos* highlights the risk of negative portrayals of their identities at the hands of people who may have little understanding of or empathy for their experiences.

These criticisms allow Bizhota and Ruby Gardenia to position themselves as authentic *exóticos*; while heterosexuals may fail to perform their roles correctly, or may even need to exaggerate their performances, Bizhota and Ruby Gardenia suggest that they inherently *are exóticos*. Yuriko similarly describes his performances of the *exótico* character as natural, in part because as a gay man, he claims that he has very convincing performances of femininity: "I am very natural. But I feel like maybe, if I exaggerated, it would look bad, because my image is that of a woman. I mean, you see me in the ring, and you realize that I'm a woman. So, imagine it, if I was to exaggerate my gestures even more. I think it would look bad."<sup>52</sup> Following Yuriko's argument, an authentic *exótico* does not have to exaggerate or over-perform their character or their movements at risk of seeming inauthentic, contrived, or even appear to be ridiculing their category and the queer identities it represents.

This leads some to question heterosexual *exóticos*' authenticity. Ruby Gardenia uses the term 'artificial' to describe *exóticos* who did not take up the character immediately: "...the same exoticism that lives in me is authentic... The others are *vatos* ["dudes"], who

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<sup>52</sup> "...soy muy natural. Pero, siento que si a lo mejor, exageraría, me viera mal, porque mi imagen es como una mujer. O sea, tú me ves en el ring, y hazte cuenta, una mujer. Entonces, imagínate, todavía exagerar los ademanes. Pues, yo creo que se viera mal."

turned into *exóticos*. And because of that, you're not original. You're an invention, you're artificial insemination."<sup>53</sup> Deriding *exóticos* who she perceives to be inauthentic, Ruby implies that those who do not identify as *exóticos* should stay out of the category.

While some *exóticos* may be called inauthentic because of their sexual orientation, others may be expected to become *exóticos* for the same reason. *Luchadores* who are perceived to be gay, bisexual, or queer may be pressured into adopting the *exótico* character because it is assumed to be natural for them. When I spoke with El Demasiado about potential *luchadores* to interview, he suggested that I contact his friend Princeso. While Princeso does not currently identify as an *exótico*, El Demasiado argued that Princeso is an interesting case: "when you see him, you don't know if he's an *exótico* or not... [His character is] androgynous... Because if you see him, he's dressed as a man. But you don't really know if he is, and there's that doubt of 'Is he or is he not?'"<sup>54</sup> This description suggests that Princeso performs both masculinity and femininity, which El Demasiado interprets as an element of the *exótico* category.

When I met Princeso in person, El Demasiado's descriptions came to mind: though Princeso clearly explained that he is not an *exótico*—at least, not yet—his physical movements, clothing, and speech seemed to blend traditionally masculine and feminine qualities. His dark hair was pulled back into a high bun, and he wore a simple button-down shirt and jeans—with no sparkles or color, as I had become accustomed to seeing with many of the openly-gay *exóticos*. He was amused that I pointed out he was wearing lipstick

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<sup>53</sup> "...y el mismo exotismo que vive en mí es auténtico... Las demás, con permiso, pero eran vatos, que se cambiaron a exóticos. Y ya con esto, no eres original. Eres una fabricación, eres por inseminación artificial."

<sup>54</sup> "...si tú lo ves, no sabes si es exótico o si no es exótico... [Su personaje es] andrógino... Porque si tú lo ves, él está vestido de hombre. Pero, no sabes si es, sí te cae esa duda de '¿Será o no será?'"

in many of his recent photos but assured me that this was a new development and he was experimenting with making his style edgier. He showed me images of his costume, at which point I noticed that he wears a wrestling mask, suggesting that he diverges from the broader maskless convention of the *estilo exótico*.<sup>55</sup> Yet as he spoke, he gracefully and gently moved his hands, containing his movements into a small physical space, and spoke in a soft, clear voice. He even joked about his long-term girlfriend, claiming that she was the masculine person in their relationship.

Though he is very explicit about not being homosexual, many of Princeso's *exótico* friends have encouraged him to become an *exótico* because of how he carries himself. As Princeso explains, he aligns with many of the qualities perceived as belonging to *exóticos*: "I'm, like, effeminate, I'm *amanerado*, I'm *modosito*... They tell me, 'No, you really are [an *exótico*].' 'No, I'm not. That's just how I always am.'"<sup>56</sup> What many may have interpreted as signs of effeminacy—and by association, homosexuality—Princeso attributes to his childhood spent around women, who he believes influenced his behavior. While he resists pressure to enter the *exótico* category, Princeso does cite *exóticos* like El Bello Greco and Cassandro as touchstones for excellence and elegance that he would like to emulate.

Though Princeso resists the label of *exótico*, this connection between effeminacy and perceived homosexuality underscores the performed gayness of the *exótico* character. To use Ruby Gardenia's terms, *exóticos* who are perceived as 'innate' *exóticos* due to their behaviors and performances may be interpreted as more 'authentic' and be more accepted

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<sup>55</sup> See Figure 10.

<sup>56</sup> "Soy como, afeminado, soy amanerado, soy modosito... Me dicen, 'No, es que tú sí eres [un *exótico*].' 'No, yo no soy. Es que yo soy así siempre.'"

than those who behave like a '*macho cabrón*.' *Exóticos* whose performances are perceived as inauthentic or forced may therefore face exclusion within their own category, especially from those who feel that their personal identities are being ridiculed.

### *Appropriating 'El Estilo Exótico'*

Many of the issues raised by Ruby Gardenia and Bizhota indicate a sense of exploitation. While they perform queerness through their *exótico* characters as an extension of their personal identities, heterosexual *exóticos* can strategically incorporate these performances and then separate themselves from the stigma of queerness. This practice serves as an example of appropriation of the *estilo exótico* and the *exótico* identity through physical signifiers, performances, and fashion.

Maha Ikram Cherid's (2021) discussion of cultural appropriation and the commodification of Blackness in the United States helps explain the consequences of appropriating elements of a marginalized culture for personal gain. Cherid describes cultural appropriation as a practice of taking or using things from a culture that is not one's own, especially without understanding or respecting that culture, which can allow an outsider to strip the cultural element of its context while using it for their personal benefit (359). In doing so, individuals who practice cultural appropriation can abuse power dynamics to cause symbolic harm to the culture from which they appropriate (Cherid 360).

Cherid argues that appropriation reveals the privilege a person has because they can select which parts of the marginalized experience they wish to engage with—usually the parts that can make them money (363). This not only exploits a marginalized group's forms of self-expression, but also threatens to reproduce hierarchies and power dynamics that

continue to harm the same group whose culture is being appropriated (Cherid 363). In the case of la lucha *exótica*, *exóticos* who operate from a position of privilege as heterosexual men can pick and choose which elements of homosexuality and femininity they choose to incorporate into their acts to advance their careers. Co-opting elements of gayness allows heterosexual *exóticos* to align with the *estilo exótico*, but they can also strategically remove these same elements from their performances when they wish to present themselves as heterosexual, thus allowing for a smoother navigation of spaces characterized by homophobia, misogyny, and transphobia.

### *Hybrid Masculinities and Gay Capital*

While gay *exóticos* may express suspicion of their heterosexual peers and their ability to appropriate the *estilo exótico*, some heterosexual *exóticos* also feel uneasy with their peers, pointing to the salience of sexual orientation within the *exótico* category. La Chona explains that he has felt tension with other *exóticos* and believes that this is because they thought that he as a heterosexual was making fun of them with his character. Insisting that he has always performed his character out of respect and admiration, La Chona recounts: “To this date I have battled a lot with *exóticos* from the gay community because I am heterosexual. And, with those *luchadores* who are quote-unquote ‘normal,’ heterosexual, well, I’ve also battled a lot.”<sup>57</sup> From his perspective, La Chona faces exclusion from all sides: from *exóticos* who are wary of his performances of gayness, and from other heterosexual *luchadores* who are homophobic.

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<sup>57</sup> “Hasta la fecha he batallado mucho con los exóticos de ambiente gay, porque yo soy heterosexual. Entonces, y con los luchadores entre comillas ‘normales’ heterosexuales, pues, también he batallado mucho.”

While heterosexual *exóticos* may be excluded within the *exótico* subculture, they may face greater social advantages outside of the *exótico* subculture because they can realign themselves with hegemonic masculinity through the performance of hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Tristan Bridges and C.J. Pascoe argue that the term ‘hybrid masculinity’ “refers to men’s selective incorporation of performances and identity elements associated with marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities” (Bridges and Pascoe 246). If they occupy positions of privilege by identifying as heterosexual, White, or as belonging to a higher socioeconomic class, men can incorporate elements of marginalized identities in a way that does not threaten their privileges and simultaneously obscures and reinforces their connections with hegemonic masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 250).

Both Ruby Gardenia and Bizhota’s critiques of heterosexual *exóticos* resonate with Máximo’s performances of a hybrid masculinity: while he can strategically appropriate elements of homosexuality and femininity to reap the rewards of playing the *exótico* character, he has chosen to publicly distance himself from homosexuality and not carry the burdens of a publicly gay persona. His decision to wrestle as an *exótico* allows him to access the benefits of wrestling within a smaller category, which allows him greater access to employment opportunities, yet his performances of a hybrid masculinity ensure that he does not lose access to his privileges associated with identifying as heterosexual. Rather, he can choose when to perform as a gay *exótico*, and when to perform more in alignment with hegemonic masculinity.

*Exóticos* like Máximo therefore threaten to fuel the suspicion towards heterosexual *exóticos*, even those who believe themselves to be allies or even activists for gay rights.

Yet queer *exóticos* are not without agency or power. La Chona's descriptions of exclusion reveal the unique position of heterosexual *exóticos* within their category: while they may be rejected by queer *exóticos* because they do not share their perspectives and experiences, they may also be rejected by non-*exótico* wrestlers. By comparison, gay *exóticos* may exercise a form of gay capital that provides them with greater social and cultural capital than heterosexual *exóticos*, who occasionally are treated as outsiders (Morris 2017).

Max Morris explains that gay capital "is an umbrella term which describes the unique forms of cultural, social, and symbolic capital available to young gay men in gay-friendly, post-gay social fields" (1199). Morris shares that "cultural gay capital describes insider knowledge about gay cultures, social gay capital describes belonging to social groups which are exclusively or predominantly gay, and symbolic gay capital describes having one's gay identity recognized and legitimized as a form of social prestige by others" (Ibid.). La Chona's frustration with feeling excluded by other *exóticos* thus reveals the power that some *exóticos* may exercise through gay capital. Gay *exóticos* frequently post images or videos on social media that demonstrate not only their *cultural* gay capital, but also their *social* gay capital formed through their friendships with other queer *exóticos*, and their *symbolic* gay capital through the recognition of their roles both within *lucha libre* and as public ambassadors. Within the *exótico* subculture, a gay identity is often conflated with the authentic *exótico* persona; being gay, then, is the norm, even as it is a minority identity within the broader *lucha libre* industry.

Morris asserts that the recognition of gay capital "inverts traditional assumptions about gay youth as victims of a homophobic culture by showing that having a visible gay identity can also be interpreted and used as a form of social privilege" (1201). *Exóticos*

certainly are not powerless within their subculture, as evidenced by La Chona's frustration with being excluded from cliques of *exóticos de ambiente*. Because La Chona openly identifies as heterosexual, he does not access the social prestige that gay *exóticos* may achieve within the *exótico* subculture, but he does identify as heterosexual, which allows him other forms of social privilege in his personal life. La Chona therefore finds himself simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged based on his sexual orientation in overlapping contexts. These unique dynamics between *exóticos* of varying sexual orientations underscores the heterogeneity of the category, even as *exóticos* attempt to maintain *exótico* normativity and perform a coherent *estilo exótico*.

#### *El Exótico 'Verdadero'*

Discussions of *exótico* authenticity and the exercising of *exótico* normativity converge in discussions about the future of the category. Though the *exótico* category has shifted towards the openly gay style, this does not preclude *exóticos* from performing elements of the metrosexual, dandy-inspired, prequeer characters of the past. Both Raymunda and Princeso have expressed admiration for the *exóticos* of the past like Sergio el Hermoso and El Bello Greco, who they frame as classic examples of the category. Raymunda fixates on these *exóticos* as examples of what he terms the *verdadero exótico* ("the true *exótico*"), who he describes as a handsome, glamorous, well-groomed, and elegant metrosexual. Today, he laments, *exóticos* are no longer metrosexual, and they are no longer elegant.

Raymunda seeks to resurrect this older model of the *verdadero exótico*, explaining: "Before, the *exóticos*... weren't gay. They were people, called heterosexuals, who only



sought glamor, elegance, to go out and wrestle. And without leaving behind their toughness and good wrestling.”<sup>58</sup> Raymunda argues that today’s *exóticos* have moved away from that older model, and towards a character that is defined by homosexuality rather than by elegance. He adds, “I want to lead the way so that people return and believe in the *verdadero exótico*, and not stay with that image of an *exótico* as a gay *luchador*, because everyone says to me, ‘Hey, you’re Raymunda, and you’re gay.’ No, I’m not gay, it’s my character.”<sup>59</sup> In this statement Raymunda both affirms the current model of the *exótico* as a gay character while distancing himself from a gay identity.

While criticizing the openly gay quality of the *exótico* character, Raymunda’s approach underscores its salience within the *estilo exótico*. As a heterosexual *exótico*, Raymunda positions himself outside of the current trajectory of the *exótico* category, circling back to previous models of the character. His hope to return to the model of the ‘*verdadero exótico*’ signals a rejection of the pro-gay quality of the category and an attempt to distance himself from homosexuality. Though he shared his perspective confidently, Raymunda was the only *exótico* throughout this study to express a desire to move away from the gay qualities of the *exótico*.

When I asked Yuriko what he would think about *exóticos* who might want to return to the metrosexual mode, he bristled, “if [someone]... wants to come tell me that I should change and be like the *exóticos* from before, do you think I’m going to take them seriously? ... I believe that everyone has a place. My respect to those who want to be like the *exóticos*

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<sup>58</sup> “Antes, los exóticos... no eran gays. Eran otras personas, cómo se llaman, heterosexuales, que únicamente buscaban lo glamoroso, lo elegante, para salir a luchar. Y sin dejar atrás su rudeza y su buena lucha libre.”

<sup>59</sup> “Entonces, yo quiero poner ese camino para que regrese la gente y vuelva a creer un verdadero exótico, y no se quede con esa imagen de que un exótico es un luchador gay, porque a mí pueden decir todos, ‘Oyen, tú eres Raymunda, y eres gay.’ No, no soy gay, es mi personaje.”

from before, but... how lazy. People don't have any fun."<sup>60</sup> While the positions articulated by Yuriko and Raymunda reveal tension within the category, Raymunda is unlikely to win this argument any time soon.

## Conclusion

Even as the *exótico* category has shifted over time, the central element has stayed the same: *exóticos* consistently explain that they perform homosexuality, specifically by performing femininity. *Exóticos* have clearly articulated the form of the contemporary *estilo exótico*, which, while multifaceted, maintains intelligibility as a performative category. The *estilo exótico* includes varying mixtures of feminine and masculine gender performances: *exóticos* are delicate and strong; they sport feminized clothing, hair, and makeup; and most importantly, they perform a gay personality. A *luchador's* capacity for performing the elements of homosexuality ascribed to the *exótico* character, such as being *amanerado*, or having *ademanes*, lends credibility to an *exótico* and their performances of queerness, even to the extent that a *luchador* may be assumed to be an *exótico* when they are not. *Exóticos* whose performances are unconvincing, or who are labeled as heterosexual *exóticos*, may therefore experience exclusion or derision for failing to perform the character correctly, especially as the *exótico* category grows increasingly intertwined with queer identities and activism in Mexico.

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<sup>60</sup> "...quiere venirme a mí a querer cambiar a ser como los exóticos de antes, ¿tú crees que le voy a hacer caso? ... Yo creo que cada quien tenemos un lugar. Mis respetos a los que quieren ser como los exóticos de antes. Pero qué flojera. La gente no se divierte."

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## PERFORMING 'EL EXÓTICO'

**Introduction**

This chapter explores the gender performances of *exóticos*, examining how they account for diverse gender identities within their own category, as well as how they interact with and contest binary sex-gender models. As performers, *exóticos*' performances of femininity and homosexuality both allow for an expansion of these models, while reinforcing assumptions about male homosexuality within the *exótico* category. This chapter considers how their modes of performance align with other gender performances, such as those of drag queens, and what they can achieve through their destabilization of gender categories. While this chapter engages with broader sociological models of gender performativity and hegemonic gender relations, it also relies on how Mexican, Latin American, and Latine authors have engaged with these concepts, enriching their application within the Mexican context.

As this chapter will demonstrate, *exóticos* perform femininity because it evokes the culturally established connections between effeminate men and a homosexual identity. Yet in the end, most *exóticos* still identify as men. *Exóticas*, on the other hand, perform femininity as an expression of their gender identities, highlighting the centering of masculine identities even within a category that relies on incorporating performances of femininity.

Through their performances of masculinity and femininity, *exóticos* engage with stereotypes of homosexuality while not necessarily claiming a homosexual identity in



public, creating space for the experimentation with, acceptance of, and potential claiming of queer identities. While some wrestlers purposefully distance themselves from their characters, others use their *exótico* characters to facilitate the acceptance of a homosexual identity, whether on a personal, familial, or social level. In doing so, *exóticos* contribute to the blurring of the ‘coming out’ narrative and challenge the binary of closeted-out, but this does not dissolve the burden of striving for familial acceptance. Ultimately, this chapter concludes that even in scenarios in which *exóticos* do not label or disclose their homosexual identities with their family members, the tacit understanding of their queerness does not absolve them of other expectations for gender conformity. Thus, the same ambiguity that allows *exóticos* to sustain a tacit understanding of their queer identities by avoiding any explicit disclosure also burdens them with pressure to adhere to heteronormative gender performances.

### **Contextualizing Discussions of Gender and Sexuality**

#### *Hegemonic Gender Relations and Masculine Ascendancy*

Examining *lucha libre* through the lens of hegemonic gender relations allows for the exploration of how *luchadores* as public figures can model ideas about masculinity and gender relations. As role models and even idols for their fans, *exóticos* inevitably intervene in gendered systems of inequality and power, best described in this context through the model of hegemonic gender relations and the concept of hegemonic masculinity. James Messerschmidt builds on the work of R. W. Connell, explaining that hegemonic masculinity is a form of masculinity that legitimates unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities

(Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity* 28). Hegemonic gender relations are naturalized and legitimated through “cultural ascendancy—discursive persuasion—encouraging all to consent to, coalesce around, and embody such unequal gender relations” (Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity* 28). This illustrates the conceptualization of hegemony not as an absolute or stable form of total control and power, but as something that shifts, reorganizes, adapts to, and even incorporates challenges to itself in each context (Connell, *Masculinities* 37). Expressions of masculinity and hegemonic masculinity vary through levels of society, regions, and temporal contexts, and as configurations of practice, hegemonic masculinities must be performed through social interaction, whether that be interpersonal, or even on a national stage (Connell and Messerschmidt 836).

Hegemonic masculinities are conceived as the idealized forms of masculinity, and “in various ways, express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires” for masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 838). While these idealized expressions or performances of hegemonic masculinity may be out of reach for most men (or people who perform masculinity), professional athletes represent a group that frequently aligns with and adequately performs these ideals (Connell and Messerschmidt 846). Professional athletes such as *luchadores*, then, are poised to model hegemonic masculinity to the public, even if their own performances are difficult or impossible for others to replicate. Because few men may model qualities of hegemonic masculinity, these systems simultaneously result in the positioning of “homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men,” rendering ‘gayness’ as “the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity, the items ranging from fastidious taste in home decoration to receptive anal pleasure” (Connell, *Masculinities* 78). This complementary relationship

underscores R.W. Connell's argument that hegemonic masculinity cannot exist except in relation to and contrast with other subordinated categories, such as femininities and nonhegemonic masculinities (*Masculinities* 68).

'Masculinity' itself does not contain a fixed set of characteristics. Rather, it occupies a privileged position in a hierarchy of gender relations, adapting to changing norms and values in any given society or time frame. As Jack Halberstam points out, "masculinity does not belong to men, has not been produced only by men, and does not properly express male heterosexuality" (*Female Masculinity* 241). Following this line of thought, Mimi Schippers emphasizes that masculinities do not belong exclusively to men or boys, just as femininity is not exclusive to women or girls ("Recovering" 89). Instead, gender hegemony—including the performance of hegemonic masculinity—reinforces and naturalizes the ascendancy of men over women, and intersects with other categories of class, race, and sexual inequality (*Ibid.*). Within *exótico* wrestling, this helps describe the fluidity of *exótico* gender performances, as well as the various gender identities of the corpus of *exóticos*; not all *exóticos* perform (hegemonic) masculinity, and not all *exóticos* identify as men.

Though the traits associated with hegemonic masculinity may shift depending on the context, Schippers explains that there are several traits that are generally included within the category, including "physical strength, the ability to use interpersonal violence in the face of conflict, and authority" ("Recovering" 91). For these masculine traits to ensure the dominance of men over women, they are "symbolically paired with a complementary and inferior quality attached to femininity," such as "physical vulnerability, an inability to use violence effectively, and compliance" (*Ibid.*). The

complementary, binary nature of these traits works to guarantee and rationalize the subordination of femininity to masculinity, reinforcing the hierarchical nature of hegemonic gender relations. While hegemonic masculinity legitimates the dominance of men over women, hegemonic femininity, then, works to feed into the same pattern of dominance and subordination (Schippers, "Recovering," 94). This relational nature of hegemonic gender relations therefore points to the potential for disturbing them.

What happens when an individual does not consistently perform the assigned content of their gender category? Schippers argues that when women perform practices and characteristics that are expected of men, these femininities become stigmatized or even perceived as a threat because they are embodied by women, receiving the label of 'pariah femininities' ("Recovering" 95). Apart from deviating from the norms established as feminine, this also "threatens men's exclusive possession of hegemonic masculine characteristics" by challenging and even contaminating the established patterns of masculine dominance sustained within gender hegemony (Ibid.). Schippers also explores the performance of male femininity, which includes "the characteristics and practices that are culturally ascribed to women, do the cultural work of situating the feminine in a complementary, hierarchical relationship with the masculine, and are embodied by men" ("Recovering" 96). Just as with pariah femininities, male femininities are stigmatizing to the men who embody them because they "threaten the hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity" (Ibid.). This can be seen in the case of effeminate men, whose masculine privilege may be considered contaminated when they perform femininity. The stigma attached to these performances therefore threatens to place male femininities and female masculinities in subordinate positions to hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic

femininity. However, as we will see in the case of *exóticos*, their ability to blend and potentially unravel said gender categorizations allows them to contest the implicit hierarchization of masculinities and femininities.

### *Masculinities and Gender Complementarity within Mexico*

Gender relations within Mexico have historically been described within a binary, heteronormative, patriarchal framework. Many authors publishing from Mexico acknowledge the cultural influences on understandings of masculinity, while also emphasizing the broader models of hegemonic gender relations that dominate mainstream discourse. Salvador Cruz Sierra explains that within Mexican culture, the effeminate homosexual man—sometimes called ‘*la loca*’<sup>61</sup> (“crazy woman”)—represents an abject image of idealized masculinity, often regarded with the same contempt, shame, and dishonor as trans women (177). Further, he argues that homosexuality is associated with femininity and passivity, leading heterosexual men to distance themselves from these qualities to reaffirm their masculinity, thus reinscribing the necessity of the effeminate homosexual man as a cultural symbol that defines the masculine heterosexual man through opposition (Ibid.).

Underscoring Cruz Sierra’s argument, Sergio de la Mora’s analysis of Mexican cinema argues that women and effeminate men (“*jotos*”) bolster the masculinity of many of the male lead roles in film. De la Mora contends that “machismo needs the joto to define and affirm itself as much as it needs a clingy woman” (5). As the effeminate man faces stigma and homophobia, his existence also indirectly affirms and bolsters the status of the

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<sup>61</sup> ‘*Loca*,’ translates to ‘crazy woman,’ but is often used to describe effeminate, homosexual men. See Hoechtl (2015) and La Fountain-Stokes (2014).

masculine man, the '*hombre*.' Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba explains that within post-Revolutionary Mexican national culture, effeminacy among men has been used to represent "the weakening of national virtues" (43). Domínguez-Ruvalcaba further contends that "there is no virility without homophobic compulsion. If virility describes or allegorizes the nation, then homophobia outlines the nation" (41). In this sense, homophobia delineates the borders of what is included and accepted within the masculinity of the nation, but is still necessary for defining masculinity, because "the masculine is known by what it rejects" (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba 3). The figure of the effeminate, homosexual man therefore holds particular relevance, as it both enables and threatens masculine dominance.

With many of these dynamics in mind, Héctor Carrillo's (2003) ethnographic research details the dichotomization of Mexican "men almost exclusively into two broad categories that were defined by demeanor. Masculine men were *hombres* or *machos*. Their counterparts were the effeminate men, the *maricones*, who were perceived as having forfeited their manhood altogether" (Carrillo 352). Importantly, this focus on the division of performances of gender points to the hierarchization of different masculinities, between the *hombres* ("men") or *machos*, and the effeminate *maricones* (a slur for gay men) whose existence "confirmed the 'normality' of the former. The *hombres*—those who were seen as legitimately manly and who were allowed to assert their dominance via the abuses of *machismo*—needed the *maricones* as a point of reference that defined where manhood ended" (Carrillo 352). In this case, the performances of 'effeminate' men served to "[mark] the point at which 'a man stops being a man.' *Maricones* defined the socially undesirable end of the spectrum of male identities; the abusive *macho* defined the other end" (Ibid.). Though the hierarchization of these different types of masculinities are much more

complicated than simply effeminate against masculine, Carrillo's exploration of the discursive categorizations of these two models demonstrates their salience in narratives about masculinity and power.

How might this play out in the world of *lucha libre*? As the majority of *exóticos* identify as men, and typically wrestle against other men (though *exóticos* do wrestle women as well), the category of *exótico* wrestling stages conflict between different performances of masculinities and the complication and disruption of the gender binary. Further, Carrillo's emphasis on 'demeanor' points to the performative nature of expressions of gender, as well as the complementary relationship implied within the two, in which the performance of masculinity depends on the contrasting performance of femininity.

A hegemonic, '*macho*,' masculinity, then, is not only defined in relation to femininity and the figure of the effeminate homosexual man, but it must also be constantly demonstrated and negotiated through social interactions, leading masculinity to be permanently questioned and in need of affirmation (Möbius 367). Janina Möbius argues that this dynamic becomes salient in *lucha libre* matches between a masculine *hombre* ("man"), and an *exótico*, who performs as *un hombre femenino* ("an effeminate man") (375). This leads Möbius to draw an explicit connection between *exóticos*' performances as effeminate men and the figure of *la loca*, explaining that *exóticos* stage the stereotype of the '*loca*' *afeminada* ("the effeminate gay/crazy woman") (383). Yet Möbius suggests that rather than merely performing stereotypes of the *loca*, *exóticos* may in fact be creating a subversive play on the concept of fixed gender identities (383).

We must not lose sight of the fact that *exóticos* are not merely stepping from one gender or sexual category into the next; rather, they are *playing* with these categories. *Exóticos* do not *only* perform femininity—they perform traits associated with femininity in some moments, and traits ascribed to masculinity in others. Similarly, their physical presentations, their clothing, and their stylization certainly incorporate many feminine elements, but this varies across generation and individual taste. Thus, I argue that *exóticos* deploy enough of the stereotype of the effeminate homosexual—*la loca*—to be intelligible as *exóticos*, but we cannot generalize the feminization of the category beyond that point. Rather, as *exóticos* engage in their performances of gender and sexuality that conjure these assumptions and stereotypes, they also do so in a fashion that calls into question the stability of their categorizations, at once drawing connections between gender, sex, and sexuality, and then smudging them. This both refuses a frozen understanding of these categories and invites an interrogation of their hierarchization.

### *Gender Performativity*

*Exóticos* are identified as queer characters largely because of their performances. This includes not only their physical behavior, but the embellishment of their bodies, the styling of their costumes, and their modes of interaction with the people around them. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (2006) points to the interactional and performative aspect of gender and its connections to the heterosexual matrix, which presupposes an innate sexual attraction between men and women. As Butler explains, gender is not an essential, natural quality that is passively scripted onto the body; rather, gender is what is performed and produced invariably and incessantly ("Performative Acts")



531). As a social construction, “gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 528). This also means that the reality of gender must be sustained through social interaction; Butler identifies this as a “tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 522). Thus, the performance of gender must be interpreted by others and attain ‘intelligibility,’ which establishes and maintains “relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 23). Those who do not maintain a sense of coherence do not perform ‘intelligible’ genders, which may threaten the illusion of the naturalness of the gender binary.

This aligns with Candace West and Don Zimmerman’s concept of ‘doing gender,’ in which they emphasize the interactive nature of gender and the constant evaluation of one’s gender performances by others. As they explain, to ‘do’ gender “is to engage in behavior at the risk of gender assessment,” because gender “is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others” (West and Zimmerman 136-140). As a social, interactive feature, gender is therefore constantly performed with social consequences. Hortensia Moreno and César Torres Cruz unpack this potency of gender performativity, explaining that performative acts of gender are linked with the power of institutions, revealing the social sanctioning to which each performance of gender is exposed; every instance in which a person performs gender, their performance is interpreted, interrogated, questioned, or held accountable (“Performatividad” 248).

Marta Lamas argues that gender therefore functions as a type of cultural ‘filter’ through which the world is interpreted, contending that it works as brake that constricts people’s desires, actions, opportunities, and decisions, depending on whether they have the body of a ‘woman’ or a ‘man’ (157). The assumption that one’s body dictates one’s gender performances has long shaped expectations for gender performances, and those who diverge from expected gender performances quickly gain the attention—and, frequently, the sanctioning—of the people and institutions around them. Gayle Rubin describes this as sexual essentialism, which promotes “the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions,” an idea which is thoroughly “embedded in the folk wisdoms of Western societies, which consider sex to be eternally unchanging, asocial, and transhistorical” (275-6).

Following the structuring of an individual’s movement through society based on categorization, Cecelia Ridgeway contends that gender functions as a primary cultural frame for shaping and coordinating behavior “by associating category membership with widely shared cultural beliefs about how people in one category are likely to behave compared to those in a contrasting category. These cultural beliefs are shared stereotypes” (148). Importantly, these stereotypes about gender and sex are forms of “cultural knowledge, whether or not we personally endorse them” (Ibid.). Ridgeway clarifies that regardless of whether people agree with or endorse these cultural stereotypes, “we think ‘most people’ hold these beliefs, [and] we expect others to judge us according to them,” leading people to continue to factor these cultural beliefs into their own behaviors (149). These beliefs and gender stereotypes come to be taken for granted, becoming embedded and institutionalized, and making them culturally hegemonic (Ibid.).

Despite the limitations that sex and gender categories can impose on individuals, people are not without agency, and *exóticos* have proven themselves to be especially creative gender performers. As Moreno and Torres Cruz assert, while gender performativity allows for the reproduction and strengthening of gender hierarchies, it does not only reproduce the same thing; rather, gender performativity opens the possibility for creating difference (“Performatividad” 248). *Exóticos* have positioned themselves as performers who do exactly that: through their gender performances, they push against implicit norms and scripts that reinforce gender hierarchies, refusing to inscribe themselves into relationships of subordination.

*Exóticos* therefore use their agency to draw from the cultural knowledge about the associations between gender, sex, and sexuality to both make their characters legible as *exóticos*, and, in consequence, interact with the ways that gender structures society. When *exóticos* perform stereotypes of effeminate gay men, they are not necessarily condoning any negative or positive associations with these identity categories, but are in fact exploiting these taken-for-granted beliefs about the connections between gender and sexuality. By playing *la loca*, *exóticos* by extension conjure a homosexual identity. Even further, when *exóticos* perform these interwoven concepts in relation to their opponents’ performances of masculinity, it allows them to engage with and challenge the hegemonic patterns of dominance and gender inequality.

*Exóticos* thus demonstrate that people have agency; they are not merely complacent victims of hegemonic gender relations doomed to endlessly reproduce the same gender performances. Through the process that Mimi Schippers describes as gender maneuvering, people can interactively “manipulate the meaning of their own or others’ gender

performances in order to establish, disrupt, or change the relationship between and among masculinities and femininities” (*Rockin’* xiii). In doing so, they can “manipulate the relationship between masculinity and femininity in ways that impact the larger process of gender structuration” (Schippers *Rockin’* 37). *Exóticos*, with their strategic incorporation of masculine and feminine elements into their performances, both challenge the hierarchization of masculinities and femininities while stripping the gender binary of its ‘natural’ or ‘real’ appearance by playfully engaging with both categories. Importantly, they refuse to uphold the coherence of the gender binary, avoiding performing a single ‘intelligible’ gender. At the same time, this process allows them to establish their intelligibility as *exótico* wrestlers: the ambiguity of their gender performances is exactly what makes them *exóticos*.

The ambiguity that *exóticos* cultivate feeds into their *estilo exótico* (“*exótico* style”), which intentionally incorporates performances of femininity to align with stereotypes of male homosexuality. Regardless of an *exótico*’s gender identity or sexual orientation, *exóticos* consistently perform what El Demasiado calls a ‘touch of gayness’ because it’s essential to their authenticity as *exóticos*. These *exótico* performances also align with performing the *joto*, which May Flower describes as part of the stereotype of the *exótico*, in which *exóticos* embody a gay character by flirting with the men in the ring, kissing them, and grabbing them. As discussed in the prior chapter, these performances can include dancing, making flirtatious gestures towards men, twirling, and walking a certain way. *Exóticos* even workshop with each other to improve their performances. Sexy Flama shares that the well-known *exóticos* Diva Salvaje and Jessy Ventura—who form part of the

wrestling trio ‘Las Shotas’<sup>62</sup> with Mamba—helped him develop his character, encouraging him to make his character sexier by walking ‘like a woman’ to the rhythm of the music in the ring. Venus Radiante, an *exótico* whose career is just beginning, expands this, arguing that while *exóticos* play ‘gays’ to the extreme, they also balance these feminine behaviors while continuing to perform elements of masculinity through aggression and strength, without ever losing sight of the fact that they are professional wrestlers. These intentional incorporations of femininity and stereotypes of homosexuality both underscore the performative nature of gender, while also pointing to *exóticos*’ strategic creation of characters that convey specific messages about gender and power.

### *Wrestling as Drag*

As professional athletes and entertainers, *exóticos*’ gender performances embed multiple layers of significance, especially since the practice of *lucha libre* itself functions as a site of converging modes of performance. Many *lucha libre* scholars agree that *lucha libre* (and wrestling in general) cannot simply be analyzed as a sport, or as a form of theater; its spectacle, cultural relevance, and violence defy these conventions. Heather Levi argues that rather than debating “whether wrestling is a contest (and therefore a sport), a ritual (and therefore ambiguous), or a theater piece (and therefore not a sport),” we can interpret Mexican *lucha libre* as a form of melodrama (“Sport and Melodrama” 61). “All sport is drama,” she explains, and wrestling—especially *lucha libre*— “is sport in the melodramatic mode” (Levi, “Sport and Melodrama” 61). Ximena Rojo de la Vega Guinea extends this interpretation, explaining that *lucha libre* “was never merely a sport or show.

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<sup>62</sup> ‘Las Shotas’ spoken aloud sounds very similar to ‘Las Jotas,’ which is a feminized slang term for gay men.

Lucha libre embraces a complex universe of meaning that reaches beyond the ring, embracing many different cultural manifestations... These wrestling spectacles are excessive displays of strength and masculinity” (Rojo de la Vega Guinea 110). As a form of cultural melodrama, driven by displays of excess, violence, strength, and power, the symbolic potency of *lucha libre* allows for its interpretation as a form of cultural performance.

The *exóticos* not only bring gender diversity into *lucha libre* through their performances, but also “literally fight for a place among the more conventional heroes and villains forged in the arenas, challenging traditional notions of gender and masculinity in the process” (Rojo de la Vega Guinea 118). The social fight that *exóticos* symbolize extends beyond gender and masculinity; as Nina Hoechohl argues, *exóticos* offer opportunities to destabilize borders through their different ways of wrestling and performing their gender, sexuality, and even their ethnicity and social class, converting arenas into hybrid sites brimming with ambiguity, where these desires, categories, and identities are contested (“Lucha Libre” 243-247). Specifically focusing on their performances of gender and sexuality that challenge dominant perceptions, Hoechohl argues that as performers of femininity and masculinity, and of diverse sexualities, *exóticos* use their unique positions to become heroes for the audience (“Lucha Libre” 243). This position as heroic public figures grants *exóticos* additional influence within the public sphere, where their performances reach large audiences.

The impact on audiences must not be overlooked, especially since audiences drive the demand for wrestling in the first place. Roland Barthes’s analysis of wrestling draws focus to the theatrical nature of *lucha libre* and wrestling in general, which he describes as

a “spectacle of excess” (Barthes 3). Barthes argues that wrestlers’ performances are designed to be visible and exaggerated to ensure intelligibility for the audiences, as a “wrestler’s function is not to win but to perform exactly the gestures expected of him” (4). Even as moves or gestures may be choreographed, such as facial expressions of pain, shouts, pins, or holds, the purpose of these signs is to become so saturated with exaggerated clarity that they can be immediately noticed and understood (Barthes 5).

Through Barthes’ descriptions of wrestling, we see the merging of the performed theatricality of wrestling with performances of gender as described by Butler. Both point to the role of intelligibility: just as Barthes argues that the moves, emotions, and suffering of wrestlers must be intelligible to audiences (4), Butler too describes the necessity of a coherent performance of gender for it to maintain its seeming naturalness and realness (Butler, “Performative Acts” 522). Because the majority of *exóticos* identify as men, their performances of femininity, including their flirtatious moves, makeup, hair styles, and costumes lead many to compare them to drag queens, which underscores Butler’s assertion that the imitation of gender through drag “implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 187). Though *exóticos* and drag queens fall into different theatrical performance categories, this does not negate the fact that both drag queens and *exóticos* draw from the symbolic potential imbued within gender performativity.

Venus Radiante explains that there are certainly similarities between drag performance and *exóticos*, at least in terms of makeup and costumes. Many younger *exóticos* today, including Bizhota, draw inspiration from the makeup styles used by drag queens and admire the elaborate costumes that they wear. However, Bizhota also makes

clear that while *exóticos* and drag queens may share a passion for feminine styles and innovative, glamorous fashion, the performative aspect is quite different: *exóticos*, he emphasizes, are athletes, while drag queens are closer to beautiful models. In fact, apart from Venus Radiante and Bizhota, few other *exóticos* felt any connection between *la lucha exótica* (“*exótico* wrestling”) and drag queen performances.

Yet the gender work of *exóticos* and drag queens is undeniable. Within their professional contexts, whether on stage or within the wrestling ring, *exóticos* and drag queens hold power. As Dana Berkowitz and Linda Liska Belgrave argue, “within the safe space of the stage, drag queens have the contextual power to subvert gender norms where they (at least temporarily) challenge audience members’ taken-for-granted notions of gender, sex, and sexuality” (177). Leila Rupp et al. similarly argue that drag artists—in their case, drag queens and drag kings—produce critiques of hegemonic gender and heteronormativity, even as different performers use different tactics (275). Both drag queens and *exóticos* strategically incorporate signs of femininity into their looks that may otherwise be coded as masculine, they adapt their physical movements to the gender category (or categories) that they wish to perform, and they embrace the elements of femininity typically rejected by masculinity.

Yet the goal of *exótico* performances is not limited to the imitation of women—as Möbius reminds us, *exóticos* aim to imitate and perform the figure of the effeminate homosexual—*la loca* (381). In their performances of the figure of the *loca*, *exóticos* cite both the gender and sexual roles associated with femininity, but they surpass a simple act of imitation, enacting a complex game of allusions and exaggerations (Möbius 381). *Exóticos* thus go beyond the work of drag queens: rather than attempting to present as



exaggerations or parodies of women, as is stereotypically seen with drag queens, *exóticos* push the boundary between masculine and feminine even further until it bends and cracks, pulling through the elements of aggression, strength, and hostility associated with masculinity, and revealing the fabricated unnaturalness of such boundaries. Möbius calls this a moment in which *exóticos* *chispean* (“spark”), or even create *quiebres* (“cracks” or fractures”) (384), in which their cultivation of ambiguity creates an energizing, potentially liberating performance.

*Testing the Limits of ‘Exótico’: De-Centering Men and Homosexuality*

As within *exótico* wrestling, drag performances generate spaces in which drag can be used to call out misogyny, patriarchy, and racism through performances and interactions with audiences, but as Fenton Litwiller warns, performance and drag culture are not necessarily activist-oriented or automatically trans-inclusive spaces (603-4). While *exótico* performances challenge the subordination of femininity to masculinity, this does not negate the demography of the *exótico* category, which is largely composed of self-identified men, who even through their performances that challenge the binary, still benefit from elements of masculine privilege. Even within the definition of the ‘*estilo exótico*,’ which centers femininity *and* masculinity, it becomes apparent that these spaces center men, whether they identify as homosexual, heterosexual, or beyond. Though a handful of *exóticos* have claimed gender identities that expand beyond the gender binary, there is an assumption that *exóticos* are *men* who perform *homosexuality*.

Within the *exótico* context, this is reflected in the terminology they use among themselves and throughout our interviews. Terms like ‘*maricón*,’ ‘*marica*,’ ‘*puto*,’ and

'*joto*,' have been used to insult effeminate men of lower and middle classes, but they have now been claimed by these same men to reaffirm themselves and are often used affectionately within their circles (Vargas Cervantes 163-4). The prevalence of these terms discursively reinforces the notion that *exóticos* are men who are performing femininity and engaging with stereotypes of homosexuality. While this tends to be the case for the majority of *exóticos*, this pushes *exóticas*—trans women within the *exótico* category—into an awkward position. As noted by Wendy Gaviota, an *exótica* herself and an advocate for trans rights, the term 'gay' is used as an umbrella category within *exótico* wrestling, even as many *exóticos* and *exóticas* may identify as women, as trans women, or as bisexual, pansexual, or nonbinary. She explains that this leads to frequent misconceptions about her gender identity within the *exótico* category since many would incorrectly assume she is a man performing as a woman for her career.

Wendy Gaviota reminds people that she is *not* a man, but a *dama* ("a lady"). However, she is not a *mujer luchadora* ("woman wrestler") either, and neither does she wrestle as an *hombre* ("man"), because she is effeminate. While the *exótico* category better aligns with her style, she explains that she constantly has to remind *promotores* ("promoters"): "I'm a transexual girl. I play the role of *exótico* because I identify as a *dama*, not a woman. As a *dama*. So I would like to be treated as a *dama*, not a woman."<sup>63</sup> When I asked Wendy how she would define 'dama,' she explained; "'*Dama*,' like a woman, trapped in the body of a man. I mean, we have to be realistic. Do you get me? I mean, I can cut off my part, I can make and remake myself, but really, I still have the genes that God

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<sup>63</sup> "Soy chica transexual. Hago el papel de exótico pero me identifico como una dama, no como una mujer. Como una dama. Entonces me gustaría que me tratara como una dama, no como una mujer."

gave me.”<sup>64</sup> In this sense, she positions being a trans *dama* as outside of being a woman or man, explaining, “I admire and respect you [women], because I have a mother, I have sisters, I have nieces, I have cousins, aunts, grandma, and more. So, I’m a *dama*, and in all intentions of the word, I’m a *dama*.”<sup>65</sup> As a *dama*, Wendy challenges a binary categorization of her own gender.

As Wendy articulates being a *dama* as adjacent to being a woman, but not quite, she similarly describes *exóticas* as a subset within the *exótico* category: “*exóticas* are only those of us who have a bust.”<sup>66</sup> She expands on this by defining *exóticas* as those who are women both within and outside of the ring, differentiating themselves from *exóticos* who identify as men:

Ellos tal vez se suben, se arreglan, se maquillan, para subirse a luchar, bajan, y se desmaquillan, y son unos chicos. Y yo no. Yo tengo que preocuparme de mi persona, desde que me levanto. En mi arreglo, en mi ropa, en mi persona, en mi imagen. O sea, es muy diferente. Ellos nada más hacen un papel, aunque sean gays, aunque están en el gremio, abarcan la palabra ‘gay.’

They might go up in the ring, do their hair, their makeup, to go up and wrestle. They come down, they take their makeup off, and they’re boys. Not me. I have to care for my person, from the moment I wake up. In my styling, in my clothing, in my person, in my image. I mean, it’s very different. They just play a part, even if they are gays, even if they’re in the union, they embrace the word ‘gay.’

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<sup>64</sup> “‘Dama,’ como, una mujer, atrapada en un cuerpo de hombre. O sea, hay que ser realistas. ¿Sí me entiendes? O sea, puedo cortarme mi parte, yo me puedo hacer y deshacer, pero realmente, sigo teniendo los genes que Dios me dio.”

<sup>65</sup> “Y a ustedes, las admiro y las respeto, porque yo tengo una madre, tengo hermanas, tengo sobrinas, tengo primas, tías, abuelas, y demás. Entonces, yo soy una dama, en todas las intenciones de la palabra, soy una dama.”

<sup>66</sup> “‘exóticas’ nada más somos nosotras las que, las que tenemos busto.”

This is why Wendy insists on being recognized and treated as a *dama*: her femininity isn't just an act—it's her life. She repeats, "I like to be treated like a *dama*. I mean, don't tell me 'Oh, it's *him*.' No. If it's cost me so much to do all these *arreglitos* ("little changes") that I've done to myself, for them to still treat me as gay—Don't call me 'him.' No. I mean, get on board, we're in the 21st century. Get with it!"<sup>67</sup>

Wendy's self-categorization as a *dama* due to her 'genes' suggests that her categorization of gender is heavily tied to traditional sex categories, which are composed of "socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males" (West and Zimmerman 127)—categories which have often been used to bolster transphobia by suggesting that trans women could never be 'real' women. Yet following West and Zimmerman's model of doing gender, Wendy clearly does gender in a way that refuses to reinforce the 'naturalness' of gender as an expression of biological sex. While writing herself out of the category of 'woman,' Wendy also refuses the category of 'man,' instead choosing '*dama*,' as a third option, going beyond the limits imposed by the gender binary.

Wendy's experiences as a *dama* and as a trans woman illustrate the potential that *exóticos* and *exóticas* hold to challenge rigid categorizations of gender and sexuality. Alba Pons Rabasa and Eleonora Garosi explain that '*lo trans*' ("transness" or "what is trans"), should be understood not just as an identity, but as 'going beyond' identity, beyond gender, underscoring the arbitrary basis of these categories and what is considered to be normal and natural (322). Further, they explain, speaking of transness as something that's coherent, homogenous, static, and to the margins of the norm, does nothing but re-marginalize and

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<sup>67</sup> "a mí me gusta que traten como una dama. O sea, no digan 'Ah, es él.' No. Como sí me ha costado tanto, hacerme los arreglitos que me he hecho, para que todavía me trates de gay—No me trates de 'él.' No. O sea, ponte, ubícate, ya estamos en el siglo veintiuno. ¡Ubícate!"

objectify trans people (Ibid.). Pons Rabasa and Garosi further argue that in articulating the term ‘trans,’ it is essential that we recognize and understand the multiplicity of experiences and subjectivities of trans individuals by moving beyond categories and not assuming the binary sex-gender system as a point of reference (311-2). Though Wendy does not speak for all *exóticas*, *damas*, or trans women, she makes an important point about not needing to fit perfectly within the gender binary. Rather than affirming her identity through the lens of biological and sexual essentialism, she rejects the categories that don’t align with how she views herself.

Similar to Pons Rabasa and Garosi’s discussion of ‘lo trans,’ Susana Vargas Cervantes explores the term ‘*travesti*,’ which is frequently (incorrectly) translated as ‘transvestite’ or ‘crossdresser.’ Vargas Cervantes rejects translations of *travesti* that would limit it to crossdressing, explaining that it has been used by activists in Argentina<sup>68</sup> to describe people who have been assigned to the masculine gender at birth, but who identify as feminine, regardless of any physical, hormonal, or surgical modifications (Vargas Cervantes 166; Cabral y Vitorro 270). Within the Mexican context, Vargas Cervantes asserts that ‘*travesti*’ describes a political identity that exists outside of and beyond the binary of feminine-masculine (166-7). While she does not articulate a *travesti* identity for herself, Wendy’s rejection of a binary understanding of gender similarly expands beyond feminine-masculine and asserts a political identity that demands recognition.

Wendy’s descriptions of her gender identity also align with what Nina Hoechtl describes in her research on *exótico* performances of ambiguity. Hoechtl proposes the concept ‘*juntopuesto*’ (“againsttogether”), to describe performances that resist

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<sup>68</sup> See the work of activist Lohana Berkins (1995; 1997), and Juliana Martínez and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz (2021).

categorizations by incorporating opposites, such as how *exóticos* incorporate both heterosexuality and homosexuality (“Lucha Libre,” 226). By challenging the idea of a single gay or heterosexual identity, or a single gender identity defined by the binary, *exóticos* deploy a *juntopuesto*, creating ambiguity through “a queer strategy of equivocation, which demonstrates the need for representations and practices that cannot be classified and that undermine or escape normative orders, situating the potentiality of living ambiguities, readings and multiple interpretations”<sup>69</sup> (my trans.; Hoechtl “Lucha Libre,” 235). *Exóticos* thus use ambiguities to their advantage, creating complex characters and performances that defy categorization and inspire creative interpretations.

In Wendy’s case, she creates a *juntopuesto* through her gender identity: she is both woman and *dama*, not necessarily opposites, but altogether refusing a single, binary categorization that would limit her. Hoechtl explains that other *exóticos* such as Cassandro el Exótico have openly questioned the categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman.’ Cassandro “cross genders or ambiguously genders the *exótiquis*<sup>70</sup> and clarifies: ‘We *exóticos* are homosexuals, and that’s how we fight. We don’t experience a conflict with being men and women at the same time” (Hoechtl, “Wrestling with Burlesque,” 77). Other *exóticos* in my study similarly engage with *juntopuesto* strategies of ambiguity in their performances, including Lady Arcoiris, who identifies as a man, but claims a strong connection to femininity. He explains: “I have the effeminate connection... But I know clearly that I will never be a woman. I mean, I separate that. I’m a man, but I’m incredibly effeminate.”<sup>71</sup> He

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<sup>69</sup> “una estrategia queer de la equivocación evidencia la necesidad de representaciones y prácticas que no sean clasificables y socaven o escapen así a los órdenes normativos, situando la potencialidad de vivir ambigüedades, lecturas e interpretaciones múltiples” (235).

<sup>70</sup> ‘*Exótiqui*’ is Hoechtl’s gender-neutral adaptation of the term ‘*exótico*.’

<sup>71</sup> “tengo la conexión afeminada... Pero yo tengo muy claro que nunca voy a ser una mujer. O sea, yo sí, separo eso. Yo soy hombre, pero soy afeminadísimo.”

highlights the performative nature of gender through his ability to act and be feminine, without having the gender identity of a woman. Though Lady Arcoiris's statements seem contradictory, these contradictions create a *juntopuesto*, exposing the complicated relationship between masculinity and femininity within the *exótico* category.

Importantly, Lady Arcoiris also emphasizes a biological nature to womanhood in the same way that Wendy Gaviota does, revealing that even though the *exótico* category includes trans women, many *exóticos*' attitudes are constrained by understandings of gender tied to sexual essentialism that suggest the *exótico* category is ultimately composed of *men*. Even as Wendy has carved out her space as an *exótica*, the prevalence of gender stereotypes within the *exótico* category repeatedly force her to explain and defend her presence. While Wendy's case demonstrates the work that remains to be done within the *exótico* category to de-center men, her own inclusion as an *exótica* highlights the malleability of the *exótico* category and its potential for improvement.

Though the *exótico* category still centers masculine identities, their performances continue to allow for fluid movement within, through, and outside of categories of gender and sexuality, whether this is through *juntopuestos*, travesti politics, or *exótica* and trans identities. As they perform these elements of ambiguity and expansion beyond the gender binary, the fact that they are performing in front of audiences imbues these performances with a sense of theatricality and even exaggeration, undermining the rigidity of ideas about gender and the stability of the divisions between masculinity and femininity. The following section considers how these performances and interactions with the gender binary both deploy and undermine assumptions about femininity and homosexuality, while considering

the impact of ambiguity in the adoption of publicly queer identities and the processes of ‘coming out.’

### **Negotiating the Closet and the Burdens of Performance**

Because of the prominence of the stereotype of effeminate homosexuals within Mexico, an *exótico*'s performances of femininity often lead audience members, other wrestlers, and even their family members to question his sexual orientation. In fact, many heterosexual *exóticos* felt the need to clarify their sexual orientations during our interviews, indicating that they feel that their performances of homosexuality—and by association, femininity—are so convincing that it extends to their personal lives, requiring them to ‘come out’ as heterosexual. Diamantina shared that he’s had people approach him after events and say that they placed bets on whether he was gay or not. Bizhota similarly gets frequent questions about his sexual orientation during interviews: “...it’s a basic question that they ask in interviews, including in trainings, wherever you go as an *exótico*: ‘And are you really [gay], or are you invented?’”<sup>72</sup> The persistence of these types of questions suggests that *exóticos* regularly operate within a layer of ambiguity, demonstrating their ability to defy categorization, convention, and even popular models of labeling sexual identities in public. Through this ambiguity, the *exótico* character’s capacity for defying categories and incorporating contradictions creates space for experimentation with gender and sexual identities, helping facilitate the acceptance of homosexuality both on a performative level with audiences, and on a personal level for *exóticos* who may struggle with their identities.

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<sup>72</sup> “es una pregunta básica, que hacen en las entrevistas, incluso en los entrenamientos, adonde vayas de exóticos: ‘Y tú sí eres, ¿o eres inventado?’”



While *exóticos* describe diverse experiences with accepting themselves, ‘coming out’ to their families, or even claiming homosexual identities in public, their roles as *exóticos* create space for them to engage with, accept, and articulate their identities. Though some *exóticos* describe always being openly gay, others have never used the label in public, let alone with their families. Yet many describe feeling that their queer identities are understood and accepted by their family members, without the need for explicit labeling or discussions. This section discusses how *exóticos*’ performances as queer characters help facilitate these experiences of acceptance and understanding, while troubling the idea of a clear, unidirectional moment of ‘coming out of the closet.’ Finally, it considers how *exóticos* may be forced to shoulder the burden of a nonnormative sexual identity, and how dynamics of coming out may shape expectations for gender performance in their personal and professional lives.

### *‘El Qué Dirán’*

If *exóticos* are such a popular faction of *lucha libre*, why would choosing to become an *exótico* be a difficult decision? Though many *exóticos* argue that discrimination through homophobia and transphobia has diminished over the years, this does not undo the legacy of stigma and violence directed against queer people, the effects of which many *exóticos* described in their interviews. This lingering sense of wariness lives on through the concept of ‘*el qué dirán*,’ (“what others will think/say”) and the continued stigmatization of queer identities.

Polvo de Estrellas shares that when he was a child, his father would warn him: “I know what you are. The only thing I want is for you not to make it obvious in front of my

friends.”<sup>73</sup> Polvo de Estrellas explains that during his adolescence (roughly 40 years ago), being gay was demonized and associated with being a criminal, a rapist, a drug addict, and a drunk. While Polvo de Estrellas argues that this has now changed, his father’s warning, “*no me pongas en evidencia*,” (“don’t make it obvious”) wove through our conversation. Polvo de Estrellas and his father appeared to agree that his homosexuality could inadvertently be made apparent through his behaviors; in other words, they worried that any performances of femininity could be interpreted as an indicator of his sexual orientation. This attitude clearly structured his adolescence, and as Polvo de Estrellas later explains in our interview, he became adept at avoiding any signs of femininity in his behaviors, movements, and appearance.

In his study of gay athletes in the United States, Eric Anderson explains that the stigma of femininity originates in the equation of homosexuality with femininity, leading boys and young men to attempt to “vigilantly adhere to behaviors that are coded as the opposite of feminine at all times” (28). Anderson explains that most of the gay athletes in his study attempted to align with and approximate themselves to the norms of hegemonic masculinity, including the “devaluing of femininity,” revealing the pressure on “gay men to act consistently with straight men,” and reinforcing the hierarchy of masculinity over femininity (108). Not only does this deny “the transformative potential of gay athleticism to undermine patriarchy,” it also silences gay identity and culture (Ibid.). For many *exóticos*, this decision to avoid femininity may not feel like a choice; it may be a question of survival, especially if they are not ready to disclose their homosexuality publicly.

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<sup>73</sup> “Yo sé lo que tú eres. Nada más lo único que quiero es que no me pongas en evidencia delante de mis amistades.”

When Polvo de Estrellas began his *lucha libre* career, he followed this strategy of avoiding femininity, which shaped his behaviors and wrestling style. Polvo de Estrellas described himself as less feminine than other homosexual men, describing being capable of filtering his gender performances from an early age. While he now publicly claims a homosexual identity, he is highly cognizant of the consequences of performing femininity in public as a homosexual man. Héctor Carrillo identifies a similar trend in his study of homosexual men in Mexico:

Masculinity was an important feature of the identities of many of the men in my study who thought of themselves as homosexuales or gay. Being masculine was extremely valued by these men because it allowed them to retain a status as regular men—to prevent others from questioning their manhood and avoid being stigmatized for their difference. (354)

Though Polvo de Estrellas does not necessarily claim a status as a ‘regular man,’ his approach to avoiding femininity suggests an awareness of the stereotypical associations between femininity and homosexuality. However, Carrillo’s study illustrates the separations between sexual orientation and gender performance: homosexual men can perform masculinity *and* femininity. Yet these performances are not treated as equal, and homosexual men who perform femininity are subject to more stigma than masculine homosexual men, who may be more able to evade scrutiny.

Polvo de Estrellas’ avoidance of performing femininity made it all the more difficult for him when he was pushed to become an *exótico*. With the promise of steadier employment, a smaller pool of competitors, and promises of stardom, Polvo de Estrellas was heavily encouraged to switch from wrestling *de hombre* (“as a man”) to wrestling as an *exótico*. Despite the promises for his career, Polvo de Estrellas struggled with his choice: “It was sort of embarrassing, because I left Acapulco with all the illusions of triumphing

in Mexico City... and so it felt like I was failing myself, and my ideals. Because I wanted to become a known wrestler, but with the name that I already had.”<sup>74</sup> On the day that he debuted as an *exótico*, Polvo de Estrellas explains that he was mortified to see that he was on television and in magazines: “I mean, the first time I saw myself, I wanted to die. Of embarrassment. But what worried me most was what my family was going to say.”<sup>75</sup> Polvo de Estrellas’s internalized shame and embarrassment around appearing publicly as an *exótico* was compounded by his concern for the reactions of his loved ones, who he worried would interpret his *exótico* character as an indicator of his homosexuality.

Yuriko shares a similar experience with the fear of recognition and the opinions of others. While he argues that his homosexuality was apparent from an early age and that his family has always been very supportive of him, he felt a certain shame when he saw other gay men, especially *exóticos*:

...cuando empecé a ver a los exóticos en televisión, me daba vergüenza. Le cambiaba. Porque yo ya sabía que también era gay. Pero es cuando apenas te estás descubriendo, y ya ves, bueno a mí en aquel entonces, me daba pena que vieran a los gays, porque besan, sus movimientos muy amanerados, bikinis, maquillaje. Entonces yo le cambiaba. ¡Y mírame ahora!

...when I started to see *exóticos* on the TV, it was embarrassing for me. I would change the channel. Because I knew that I was also gay. But when you’re just barely discovering yourself, you know, well, at least for me, I felt ashamed for the gays to be seen like that, because they kiss, and they have their *movimientos muy amanerados* [“very mannered movements”], bikinis, makeup. So I would change the channel. And look at me now!

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<sup>74</sup> “Entonces, a mí me daba como que pena, aparte yo salí de Acapulco con todas las ilusiones de triunfar aquí en la Ciudad de México... entonces... sentía yo que estaba fallando a mi... mis ideales. Porque yo quería ser un luchador conocido, pero con el nombre que yo traía.”

<sup>75</sup> “o sea, la primera vez que yo me vi, yo me quería morir. De la pena. Pero me preocupaba más qué le fueran a decir a mi familia.”

Even as the *exóticos*' representations of homosexuality may have been positive, Yuriko's experience was primarily marked by shame, leading him to avoid seeing representations of effeminate homosexuality.

Reinforcing the connections between gender performances and assumptions about sexual orientation, Yuriko and Polvo de Estrellas both expressed discomfort in their early years with performances of femininity because of what they feared these performances might suggest about their sexual orientations. Héctor Carrillo explains that even among Mexican homosexual men, the hierarchies of gender continue to reinforce the stigmatization of male femininity:

For many of the masculine men who identified as homosexual or gay the demeanor of men who were openly effeminate or who had adopted identities as women were very threatening. They saw them as a barrier to the eventual acceptance of homosexuality in Mexican society and as a burden that prevented homosexual men from moving beyond the stereotype of the maricón. (355)

Yuriko may have felt uncomfortable with the *exóticos* on TV because of the potential for self-recognition or embarrassment, but this discomfort also parallels the threat Carrillo's participants felt that effeminate homosexual men might endanger the acceptance of homosexuality in Mexican society.

Even heterosexual *exóticos* may experience shame and an apprehension of being interpreted or labeled as effeminate and homosexual based on their gender performances. Cariñoso Jr. shared that at the time of our interview, he had not yet told his own children that he wrestles as an *exótico*. He worried whether they would be proud of him if they found out, and whether they would continue to view him in the same light. His anxieties about his children's reactions suggest that he views being an *exótico* as antithetical to his

role as a father to his children: “Because for me, they saw me as a father, as an image. With a beard, long hair, short hair, shaved, with a tie, I don’t know. But now, well, I have to give an image to the character, for the fight, for the fans. Waxing my eyebrows, curling my eyelashes, painting my lips, no? That sort of thing. That’s what I sell, right? The image. So I don’t know if they [would] accept it.”<sup>76</sup> From his perspective, wrestling as an *exótico* threatens to transfer the label of ‘homosexual,’ along with the effeminacy that he performs, to his image as a father figure to his children, potentially contaminating his performance of hegemonic masculinity. While he could separate himself from homosexuality by attributing these performances to his character, it appears that he fears that his performances of homosexuality might be too convincing for his children.

The tension between being a father and a wrestler is not unfamiliar for Cariñoso Jr.. His own father wrestled as the original version of Cariñoso, and as a child, Cariñoso Jr. and his mother would accompany his father to wrestling events. As his father would approach the ring, Cariñoso Jr. explains, the audience would hurl homophobic insults at him, and his mother would become visibly uncomfortable. While it was much more common in prior decades for *exóticos* to live heterosexual lives, Cariñoso Jr. explains that this did not protect them from homophobia at *lucha libre* events. His mother would react to these taunts, arguing “But he’s a man! He has children, he has a family, he’s married to me!”<sup>77</sup> but she eventually decided to stop attending the matches because of her discomfort. His mother seemed to believe that if she could just prove her husband’s heterosexuality,

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<sup>76</sup> “Porque a mí, me vieron como papá, como una imagen. Con barba, cabello largo, cabello corto, rasurado, corbata, no sé, *equis*. Pero ya ahorita, pues, ya tengo que dar una imagen para el personaje, para la lucha, para la afición. El depilarme las cejas, el enchinar las pestañas, el pintarme los labios, ¿no? Ese tipo de cosas. Este, pues, es lo que vendo, ¿no? La imagen. Entonces, no creo que lo acepten mucho.”

<sup>77</sup> “Pero no, ¡es hombre! Tiene hijos, tiene familia, ¡está casado conmigo!”

the homophobic taunts would lose their power. Yet in doing so, she also equated being a ‘man’ with being heterosexual, implying that being an *exótico* is *not* being a man. In doing so, she simultaneously articulated the distinction between an individual’s performances of gender and their sexual orientation, while reinforcing the connection between *exóticos*’ frequent performances of femininity and the stereotypes of homosexuality that they conjure.

These contradictions force *exóticos*, whether homosexual or not, to step into the performative space of ambiguity when they perform their characters. For some heterosexual *exóticos*, this means temporarily adopting a homosexual identity, leading many of them to repeatedly ‘come out’ as heterosexual in their personal lives. *Exóticos* must therefore contend with the reactions of the public—which range from homophobic taunts to celebration and admiration—regardless of their sexual orientations. Performing homosexuality therefore poses a risk to *exóticos* who view homosexuality as contaminating their personal lives, but it seems that the greater concern lies in performing femininity too convincingly, to the point that their masculine privileges may be endangered. The label of *homosexuality* therefore isn’t as much of a threat as losing their claims to *masculinity*.

### *Family Impact*

*Exóticos* describe experiencing homophobia and rejection from both the public and from their family members on two fronts: one, for choosing their *exótico* characters, and two, for their own sexual orientations. Though *exóticos* do attempt to garner favor with audiences, the reactions of their family members hold significantly more weight. Many *exóticos* shared that their family members are very proud of them for being *exóticos*, though

many were less clear about whether this pride extended to their sexual orientations. Other *exóticos* like Ruby Gardenia have unfortunately experienced anger or rejection from their families due to growing up queer (Huth 258). In describing the burden of her own tumultuous relationship with her biological family, Ruby Gardenia explains that “the family is the most important social structure, right?”<sup>78</sup> As a primary social structure and a source of significant support, family reactions therefore hold great significance for anyone, but for some *exóticos*, their career choices and their personal identities threaten to strain these relationships.

When Sexy Flama chose his *exótico* character, he claims that he received support from his mother, but his father, who was also a *luchador*, exclaimed “What do you mean? Do you know what an *exótico* is? It’s being gay!”<sup>79</sup> Though Sexy Flama is heterosexual, the stigma of playing a gay character posed a threat to his relationship with his father. La Chona similarly struggled with his father accepting his choice to be an *exótico*, even though he identifies as heterosexual in his private life. He credits his growing career and integration into the *Lucha Libre AAA* league with ultimately changing his father’s mind; once he could brag about his son being on television and being famous, it became easier for La Chona’s father to accept his career as an *exótico*.

The rejection of fathers reveals the broader implications of sexual orientation within family structures, as well as the looming threat of *el qué dirán*. In their research on Mexican models of honor and shame, Marco Alejandro Núñez-González and Guillermo Núñez Noriega argue that these concepts are poles of evaluation that reinforce models of desirable

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<sup>78</sup> “La familia es la primera estructura social más importante, ¿cierto?”

<sup>79</sup> “¿Cómo crees? ¿Sabes qué es un exótico? ¡Es ser un gay!”



behavior; when individuals perform desired behaviors, they are conferred honor and social status (6). Though one's individual behaviors influence their social status, their honor and social prestige are also shaped by the other people within their families and social networks. As Núñez-González and Núñez Noriega explain, men's honor is tightly linked to the sexuality of the women in their lives, resulting in a patriarchal regulation of women's behavior (7). However, I contend that their sons, brothers, and other male family members may also impact their social status if they perform femininity. A son who performs femininity or is believed to be homosexual—thus potentially diminishing his ability to perform hegemonic masculinity—may also 'contaminate' or threaten his father's social standing.

If a son performs femininity, then his sexuality will also come under higher scrutiny. Now, Polvo de Estrellas' father's comments about hiding his homosexuality in public reveal a broader concern: his father's social standing. A father asking his son to not demonstrate his queerness in front of his own friends doesn't necessarily suggest that the father is homophobic (though he certainly could be), but rather that this father is aware of the social impact of having an effeminate, homosexual son, and how this could shape his own honor and prestige, as well as the standing of his family within their community.

*Exóticos* are therefore made aware of the risks of performing femininity through their characters, which could attract the label of 'homosexual,' even if they themselves do not identify as such. So why would *exóticos* be willing to take this risk? To start, many *exóticos* remain convinced that the separation between their personal lives and their characters is enough to shield them from public scrutiny. By emphasizing that the *exótico* is merely a character, wrestlers can discursively distance themselves from homosexuality

and any subsequent stigma. Yet *exóticos* may also be willing to take this risk because of the promise of fame: several *exóticos* mentioned that their fathers only began to accept their career choice once they started to become famous. Having a son who appears in the media and who has become a successful *luchador*—whether *exótico* or not—can become a point of pride, even if some fathers may insist that their son’s performance of homosexuality is just an act.

In the sports context, Eric Anderson describes this flexibility for homosexual athletes in relation to what he terms ‘masculine capital’ (23). Anderson argues that the more a man increases his worth among other men—for *exóticos*, this could include appearing on television or being contracted by a major *lucha libre* league—the more he raises his masculine capital (Ibid.). Even among homosexual athletes who may not fit the definition of hegemonic masculinity because of their sexual orientations, “they may still raise their masculine capital by acting in accordance with the other tenets of orthodox masculinity” by performing other valued masculine traits and being recognized as a talented and hardworking athlete (Anderson 99).

Anderson contends that athletes with recognized masculine capital may be permitted more social transgression—such as being an *exótico* who performs femininity—than those lacking masculine capital (101), allowing them to evade “the policing of sexual and gender roles within the context of the athletic institution” (104). As long as *exóticos* can successfully perform masculinity in the right contexts and protect their masculine capital—regardless of sexual orientation—they are allowed greater freedom. This may also help lift the burden from *exóticos* who feel pressured to come out: as long as they protect

their masculine capital, they will be allowed greater flexibility and less scrutiny of their sexual and gender roles, potentially decreasing the need to label their sexuality publicly.

*'Salir del Clóset'*

Without any public labeling, the ambiguity surrounding an *exótico's* sexual orientation often provokes the question 'Is he, or isn't he?' This blurriness results from what many scholars have described as a greater flexibility to the concept of 'the closet' than in the United States, where said model has become a popular way of discussing sexual identity. While Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes 'the closet' as "the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (71), Javier Corrales and Mario Pecheny explain that the U.S. concept of 'the closet' cannot be so easily transferred to the Latin America context. They challenge the idea of the closet as a one-way street, in which a person comes out of the closet and never returns. They argue that "the closet might be a necessary place for citizens to enter, at least occasionally, in order to find protection and freedom," for reasons such as prolonged homestay (living with family)—which might surround people with homophobia and delay the rise of gay identity—and the availability of different types of closets (Corrales and Pecheny 9-12). They argue that this is particularly common where incomes are low and young people cannot always afford independent lifestyles away from their families, which is reinforced by the cultural preference for unmarried children to stay within the household (Corrales and Pecheny 14).

Corrales and Pecheny cite several studies that describe various types of closets in/through which people may express homosexual desire or have sexual relations with limited consequences, potentially decreasing the pressure or need to 'come out' (17). Some

of the most relevant examples include the ‘marital-life closet’, in which a spouse may tolerate extramarital affairs; the ‘good-parent closet,’ in which a parent’s behavior is tolerated as long as they are a reliable provider for the household; and the ‘top-versus-bottom closet,’ which perpetuates the idea that if a person performs certain sexual roles, they may not be considered ‘homosexual,’ including being a “sexual penetrator, a nonkisser, or simply the man who sets the rules of sexual activity,” (Ibid.). These scenarios may allow people to avoid the label of ‘homosexual,’ deflect their family members’ scrutiny of their actions, and may reduce their need or desire to discuss their sexual activities and identities with their family members.<sup>80</sup> However, just as there are several factors that may reduce the necessity of ‘coming out,’ for Mexican men, these same measures—such as stable housing and familial support—could be jeopardized if they were to have explicit conversations about their sexual identities with their families (Decena 346). *Salir del clóset* (“to come out of the closet”), then, is not a choice that can be lightly made.

There are some *exóticos* who have chosen to make the connections between their *exótico* characters and their personal identities explicit. May Flower, for example, never attempted to hide his homosexuality as an *exótico*; he simply brought his own personality to the character and has inspired many other *exóticos* and gay men to do the same. Many *exóticos* also framed becoming an *exótico* as an important step in their experiences of publicly claiming a homosexual identity, stepping beyond the parameters of ambiguity that the character creates.

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<sup>80</sup> It is important to acknowledge that these models heavily center homosexuality among men. As César Torres Cruz and Hortensia Moreno Esparza conclude, there are currently very limited sociological studies of the sexuality of women in Mexico (“Sociología cuir” 16).

Yet for some, the choice to make their homosexuality explicit was more difficult. Polvo de Estrellas had agonized over his choice to become an *exótico* not just because of the professional implications, but also because as he framed it, becoming an *exótico* was akin to coming out: “I told my mom that it was the moment—the moment where I had to come out into the public eye, because I was a closeted gay.”<sup>81</sup> Even though it was his choice to assume the *exótico* character, the decision was momentous for him because it had the potential to make his homosexual identity more explicit.

For Lady Arcoiris, his decision to become an *exótico* similarly paralleled his experience of coming out. Prior to this, he knew he was homosexual, but he didn’t want to show it. In fact, he even admits that he was ‘wrong,’ because he was ‘*machista*’ (“sexist” or “chauvinist”) and would criticize gay and lesbian couples. He argues that because he did not accept himself for who he really was, he created a facade of anger for protection. When he decided to take on the *exótico* character, he imagined that becoming an *exótico* would allow him to be himself, allowing him to use his character as a shield to deflect any personal criticisms. In fact, he now feels indebted to his character because it helped him be himself, both within and outside of the character: “It gave me the courage, as they say, to come out of the closet—even though ‘the closet’ is for clothing, right? It gave me the courage to come out, and show who I really am.”<sup>82</sup> Now, as an *exótico*, he shares that he has been well-received by the public.

Beyond constituting a pivotal moment in his personal journey, the public’s acceptance of Lady Arcoiris bolsters the precedent of *exóticos*’ positive experiences of

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<sup>81</sup> “Entonces, yo le dije a mi mamá que era el movimiento de, era el momento de que, pues, tenía que salir a la luz pública, porque yo era gay de closet.”

<sup>82</sup> “Me dio ese valor, de salir adelante, me dio ese valor de como quién dice, salir del clóset, aunque ‘el clóset’ es para la ropa, ¿la verdad? Me dio ese valor de salir, y demostrar realmente quién soy.”

coming out through their characters. As an individual, it may be difficult to address topics such as sexual orientation, especially in conversation with family members who might not be accepting or understanding. But by choosing to perform as queer-coded characters, *exóticos* open the door to broader expressions of gender and identity. They allow themselves to perform femininity more freely; they allow themselves to be associated with homosexuality, even if they do not or are not ready to identify as homosexual. Becoming an *exótico* thus allows them to demonstrate that as men, they can perform femininity and still be men and maintain their masculine capital; and regardless of their personal sexual identities, they can be interpreted by the public as homosexuals and still be valued as wrestlers.

El Demasiado shares a similar story, explaining that in his early days of *lucha libre*, he didn't want to be an *exótico*: "I mean, I was in the closet, because I didn't accept myself as a person. I always said that I was heterosexual, but of course I knew, since I was a child, I know what I am. But, because we're in a *machista* society, I hadn't accepted it."<sup>83</sup> At first, El Demasiado rejected the idea of becoming an *exótico* because he was uninterested in crossdressing or wearing makeup, as he had seen many *exóticos* do. As his training progressed, however, and after encouragement from older *exóticos*, he saw that there was more diversity to the *exótico* category than he had realized, citing *exóticos* like Nygma, who wear more theatrical makeup than feminine makeup. When he did become an *exótico*, El Demasiado explains:

Fue un poco, sí, salir del clóset, aceptarme como soy, mostrarle a la gente que yo realmente soy, ¿no? Me di cuenta que como exótico, ese posible

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<sup>83</sup> "O sea, yo estaba en el clóset, porque yo no me aceptaba como [persona]. Yo siempre dije que yo era heterosexual, que claro que yo ya sabía, desde niño, yo sé lo que soy. Pero, porque estamos en una sociedad muy machista, no lo había aceptado."

rechazo que hubo en mi infancia, porque fui una persona buleada, o sea yo padecí mucho *bullying* por ser como soy... Entonces, yo también tenía miedo de que siendo un luchador exótico, siguiera esa crueldad conmigo... por lo contrario, a nosotros los exóticos, el público nos ve como ídolos. Nos ve como... un ejemplo a seguir. Entonces, fue cuando yo dije, ‘Qué bendición ser exótico.’”

It was a bit like coming out of the closet, accepting myself for who I am, showing people who I really am, right? I realized that as an *exótico*, that possible rejection that there was in my childhood—because I was bullied, I mean I suffered a lot of bullying for being who I am... Well, I also was afraid that being an *exótico*, that the same cruelty would happen to me... on the contrary, the public sees us *exóticos* like idols. They see us like... role models. So, that’s when I said, ‘What a blessing to be an *exótico*.’

Beyond describing it as a process of coming out, El Demasiado also saw becoming an *exótico* as a process of building confidence, of finally feeling accepted, and finally being able to be himself.

El Demasiado explains that becoming an *exótico* not only gave him freedom of expression but has also created a healthier psychological balance. As he sees it, his character brings out the parts of his inner self that he wouldn’t normally express. While “the majority of *luchadores* try to be a character... my character is trying to pull out my real self.”<sup>84</sup> El Demasiado is confident, bold, and extroverted: “what I would want to be every day, but can’t... because of ‘normality,’”<sup>85</sup> he explains.

For these *exóticos*, choosing their characters lifted restrictions on their options for expressing themselves. Beforehand, performing femininity, wearing symbols of femininity, or showing attraction towards men could incur accusations of being

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<sup>84</sup> “la mayor parte de los luchadores tratan de ser un personaje... mi personaje está tratando de sacar de mi verdadero yo.”

<sup>85</sup> “que yo quisiera todos los días ser así, y que no puedo, porque... ‘la normalidad.’”

homosexual. With the adoption of the *exótico* character, however, these *exóticos* could perform these elements with less fear of personal attack—they were just performing the *character*. The decision to become an *exótico* also opened a door for them to claim homosexual identities in their personal lives if they desired. However, the act of ‘claiming’ an identity, or opening a ‘door,’ within the model of ‘coming out of the closet,’ must be reconsidered with the understanding that coming out is not necessarily a linear or permanent action. Within the *exótico* context in particular, Carlos Decena’s theory of ‘tacit subjects’ helps unpack the complexity and flexibility of the ‘closet’ and how it can allow *exóticos* to strategically harness the ambiguity surrounding their characters and personal lives.

#### *The ‘Tacit Subject’ and the ‘Closet’*

While Corrales and Pecheny describe what scenarios might allow or prevent a person from coming out, Carlos Decena further questions the idea of the closet as a space with defined borders. In his study of Dominican immigrant gay and bisexual men in New York City, he examines “the distinction between refusing to discuss an openly lived homosexuality and silence” (Decena 340). Decena argues that the men in his study “inhabit a space that is ‘in’ and ‘out’ of the closet,” developing the term ‘tacit subject’ as a metaphor to suggest “that coming out may sometimes be redundant” (Ibid.) Sedgwick echoes this, asserting that while ‘closetedness’ is a performance, sustained by the speech act of silence, when a person does come out, the speech act “may have nothing to do with the acquisition of new information” (3). In other words, “coming out can be a verbal declaration of something that is already understood or assumed—tacit—in an exchange. What is tacit is



neither secret nor silent” (340). Decena argues that even if a conversation about a family member’s sexual orientation never occurs, the family members may still “‘get’ their gayness,” despite any efforts to conceal it” (340). He further contends that families also play a part in maintaining a ‘public secret,’ making them complicit in concealing someone’s sexual orientation (Decena 341). Sustaining a public secret therefore allows families to avoid confrontation and protect kin relationships from conflict (Decena 345).

The commitment to a collaborative effort to sustain a certain image or reality resonates with Butler’s descriptions of gender performativity: gender must be sustained through social interaction, and there is a “tacit collective agreement” to sustain this cultural fiction (“Performative Acts” 522). Just as the cultural fiction of the mutual exclusivity of the gender binary is sustained through performance, the willful public secret of a family member’s sexuality must also be collectively maintained. In many instances, this is made possible by avoiding conversations that would lay bare the protected public secret or force an acknowledgement or even a decision based on the exposed information.

Though *exóticos* like El Demasiado describe becoming an *exótico* as a form of coming out of the closet, this does not mean that they have explicitly ‘come out’ to everyone in their personal lives. El Demasiado explains that while his parents both know about his career as an *exótico*, he has never had an explicit conversation with them about his sexual orientation because he believes they have deduced it—they already understand. He senses that his mother is uncomfortable with these discussions, especially because of homophobic comments she has made in the past. “I think she already knows,” he explains, “...she already knows everything about me. And I’m fine with that. She loves me how I

am, and my father as well. My father is proud of me, of what I am.”<sup>86</sup> Because he can sense the tacit understanding of his parents, El Demasiado has resolved (at least, at the time of the interview) that he will not force his parents to be part of that conversation; he doesn’t think that they are ready for him to say it. Even if they are not ready to have the conversation, El Demasiado knows that his parents support him: his mother gives him suggestions on his costumes, and his father brags about him to his friends. This gives him enough security to leave the conversation for later, if ever.

While clearly evidencing Decena’s model of the tacit subject, these decisions underscore the shortcomings of a model like the closet. El Demasiado argues that the process of coming out in Mexico is different than in the United States, where he perceives the process to be more black and white. Echoing the descriptions of Corrales and Pecheny (14), El Demasiado argues that children live with their parents well into adulthood, and often continue living in close proximity for the rest of their lives. There is less privacy than in the United States, and this closeness means that one’s sexual and romantic partners are more visible to their family members, even if a direct conversation about sexual orientation never occurs. He worries that explicitly coming out would be an abrupt process, because:

...tiene que haber una transición. Todo tiene que ir poco a poco... Y también creo que mucho tiene que ver con esa parte que aquí en México sí tenemos como, un [duelo]... Es como cuando si pierdes algo, si te muere alguien, y tienes que asimilarlo poco a poco. Creo yo que para nuestros papás, y para mis papás, para decirles que ‘Soy gay,’ es como un [duelo], porque es para ellos perder un hijo, o la expectativa de un hijo que ellos tenían, para recrear una nueva persona, ¿no? Porque al final de cuentas, ellos te asimilaban como hombre, como heterosexual, y sí es perder a un hijo.

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<sup>86</sup> “Creo que ella ya lo sabe... Ella ya sabe todo, y sabe todo de mí. Y con eso me conformo. Ella me quiere como soy, y mi papá también. Mi papá está orgulloso de mí, de lo que yo soy.”

...there needs to be a transition. Everything has to go slowly... I also think that it has to do with what we have in Mexico, like a [mourning]... It's like when you lose something, if someone dies, and you have to go absorbing the information little by little. I think for our parents, and for my parents, to tell them 'I'm gay,' is like a [mourning process], because for them it's losing a son, or the expectation for a son that they had, to regrow a new person, right? Because at the end of the day, they took you as a man, a heterosexual, and it's like losing a son.

El Demasiado's description of a mourning process suggests that these conversations could be painful for parents and family members. Choosing to sustain a tacit subject, on the other hand, allows for a more gradual absorption of knowledge, while also preserving the familial ties that might be strained to the point of severance within the closet model.

The tacit subject therefore allows for greater nuance than a simple in-or-out model of coming out. Decena warns that privileging the act of coming out "as the act that produces the 'public' gay subject makes the researcher insensitive to ways of dealing with the closet that avoid coming out while keeping the closet door ajar," warning that it can obscure the collaborative nature of the tacit subject (349). He argues that "the closet door is ajar only to the extent that the gay subject and his or her others coproduce the closet when they interact with each other" (Decena 349). This applies not only to *exóticos* and their families, but also to *exóticos* and the public. The ambiguity and potential surrounding an *exótico* wrestler's personal identity can be sustained only as long as the others in their surrounding continue to sustain it.

While some *exóticos* do choose to have explicit conversations with their family members, and many do talk about their sexual orientations with the public, there is no clear expectation for *exóticos* to do so. Rather, through the ambiguity generated through their performances, *exóticos* can create discursive distance between themselves and their

characters, giving them the choice of how much to share, with whom, and when. Through their characters, *exóticos* ‘keep the closet door ajar,’ (Decena 349), and at the same time suggest that labeling themselves and others might not be necessary.

*Shouldering the Performative Burden of the Tacit Subject*

Though the tacit subject may be sustained by the entire family, the burden of maintaining the illusion of heteronormativity still falls disproportionately to the queer family member(s). While sexual desires, identities, and practices can more easily be relegated to private spaces, performances of gender can easily be read as nonconforming, and thus incur greater scrutiny and stigma (Acosta 23). In her ethnographic work concerning how sexually nonconforming Latinas negotiate family acceptance, Katie Acosta emphasizes that while sexual orientation is important, families often focus more on adherence to appropriate modes of gender performance. Mothers of queer Latina women, she argues, “were more comfortable accepting their daughters as lesbian, bisexual, and queer women if these daughters maintained the outward displays of dominant femininity instilled in them as young girls” (Acosta 23). Acosta explains that properly maintaining the outward performances of dominant femininity—a performance of femininity that is “widely accepted and celebrated in a given context but that do[es] not complement or support the ascendancy of hegemonic masculinities” (17)—allows “mothers to validate themselves and for the larger community that their daughters were still women even when they were in relationships with other women” (23). Even if their daughters are sexually nonconforming, the mothers expect their daughters to adhere to what they deem to be appropriate performances of gender.

Pressure to adhere to gender norms over sexual norms pushed many of the sexually nonconforming Latinas in Acosta's study to perform what she calls 'situational femininities,' which "are meticulously planned and involve an array of physical appearances," which requires them to produce specific versions of femininity that align with their audiences' (e.g. their families') expectations in order to be accepted (Acosta 30). This could include wearing specific clothing and modifying their behaviors in the presence of their families. While her participants did not necessarily conceive of it as such, Acosta argues that the women in her study perform these situational femininities as a form of emotion work, which they produce in exchange for familial approval (22).

The production of situational femininities in exchange for familial approval highlights many of the self-regulating practices that *exóticos* described in their personal and professional lives. Importantly, gender performances are interpreted as clues about an individual's sexual orientation and are therefore regarded as something that can be controlled to maintain an appearance of conformity. Polvo de Estrellas' father's demand that he not make his homosexuality obvious highlights the heteronormative regulation of gender performances: "I know what you are. The only thing I want is for you not to make it obvious in front of my friends..."<sup>87</sup> While his father insinuates that he knows of his sexual orientation, he does not name it; rather, in order to sustain the tacit subject within their family, he asks that Polvo de Estrellas adhere to traditional performances of masculinity. In response, Polvo de Estrellas eventually cultivated situational masculinities, which not only applied to his family life, but as later chapters will illustrate, helped him gain access to training in *lucha libre*. Yet he also learned to develop situational

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<sup>87</sup> "Yo sé lo que tú eres. Nada más lo único que quiero es que no me pongas en evidencia delante de mis amistades."

femininities, as he describes learning to perform as an *exótico* from the women and *exóticos* around him, adapting his physical movements, style, and behaviors for his wrestling.

Knowing how to alternate between different performances of gender based on the context certainly makes Polvo de Estrellas an adept gender performer, but as Acosta observed with her participants, this can be a burdensome process. Even if a sexual orientation is not explicitly labeled, and an *exótico* maintains a tacit subject with his family, this does not protect him from the burden of performing gender situationally to compensate for having a nonconforming sexual orientation. In choosing to perform as an *exótico*, then, queer individuals find a space that allows them to publicly express themselves without the same burden of adhering to gender norms. Some even find that being an *exótico* grants them access to spaces that allow them to experiment with claiming a queer identity, while having the freedom to eschew sexual identity labels through their cultivation of ambiguity.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the ways that *exóticos* perform gender, and how these performances both challenge binary categorizations of gender and their connections to stereotypes of sexual orientation. *Exótico* performances expand beyond the confines of heteronormativity and prescriptive gender performances, allowing individual wrestlers to unravel the gender binary and create new expressions of gender. Yet this also potentially flattens the diverse gender identities within the category back into a male-centered, homosexual identity that eclipses the presence of other queer identities within their own category, such as trans *exóticas*.

While *exóticos*' performances of femininity allow them to destabilize binaries of gender, these performances also challenge the idea that one's gender performances reveal one's sexual identity. Though an *exótico* performs a mixture of femininity and masculinity, their performances of femininity do not necessarily connote homosexuality on a personal level. Rather, performing as an *exótico* gives these wrestlers access to a space where they can displace the stereotypes projected onto them. Their performative cultivation of ambiguity allows *exóticos* to determine which label, to what degree, and when they might claim queer identities (if at all), while also facilitating their self-acceptance and potential adoption of publicly homosexual or queer identities. The impact of these performances, whether they explicitly claim homosexual identities or not, hold the potential to present positive examples of queer pride to the public, creating space for other *exóticos* and individuals alike to follow suit.

Finally, while *exóticos*' experiences highlight the limitations of models of the 'closet,' the collective production of the 'tacit subject,' may continue to disproportionately burden queer *exóticos* with other forms of gender normativity. While *exóticos* demonstrate their capacity for situationally performing gender, they are still incentivized to avoid the stigma of femininity. Further, as some *exóticos* seek to avoid the stigma of femininity, they may still ultimately participate in the hierarchization of masculinity over femininity.

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‘EL BESO’

**Introduction**

When describing what makes *exóticos* different from other wrestlers, the participants in this investigation often use words like ‘glamor,’ ‘elegance,’ and ‘homosexuality.’ But how does this look when *exóticos* are wrestling? Besides the elements of costume design, hair, and makeup—which vary among *exóticos*, but heavily deploy feminine stylings—the physical performances of most *exóticos* can include flirtatious, energetic moves like blowing kisses or dancing, and stereotypical gestures and positionings such as floppy wrists or swaying hips. Yet the move that is most unique to *exótico* wrestling is the *beso del exótico* (“*exótico*’s kiss”), which involves kissing another wrestler on the mouth. The *beso* (“kiss”) is dramatically staged but does not always require physical contact between the lips of the two wrestlers; some wrestlers may perform a quick peck or a stage kiss rather than a romantic kiss, some may use tongue, and some may never even make skin-to-skin contact because their opponent is wearing a mask.

This chapter considers the multitude of performances, implications, and possibilities embedded within the *beso del exótico*. Though previous academic discussions of the *beso del exótico* have pointed to its symbolic potency and its weaponization of homosexuality, I base my analyses in ethnographic data that illustrate the empowering potential of the move as well as the complexities of integrating the *beso* into the performance of a queer-coded character. Guided by the descriptions *exóticos* provided during 16 semi-structured interviews, I argue that as a performative strategy, the *beso*

resists a heteronormative reading of a *lucha libre* match, pointing to the performative nature of gender and the malleability of categorizations of sexual orientation. In a single moment of physical contact between two wrestlers, *exóticos* can use the *beso* to both disidentify from performances of a heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity, while also refusing to reinscribe themselves within the traditional bounds of femininity, instead gender maneuvering to shift power dynamics and create new expressions of gender and sexuality whose ambiguities fuel its transformative potential. The *beso* therefore constitutes a performance of the *exótico* repertoire that also challenges hegemonic gender relations and affirms a pro-queer *exótico* identity.

Though the *beso* does allow for *exóticos* to play with and even contest traditional gender relations, blur the divisions between masculinity and femininity, and challenge the performances of hegemonic masculinity of many of their opponents, the *beso* can both empower and overshadow *exótico* performances on a public stage. This chapter therefore explores the consequences of the *beso* within *exótico* wrestling as a category, detailing the various concerns and solutions that *exóticos* presented regarding the application and interpretation of the *beso*, including debates surrounding authenticity and vulgarity. While some *exóticos* view the *beso* as an essential element of their wrestling, others believe that the move has outrun its usefulness and now turn their focus to other elements of their wrestling styles. This chapter therefore seeks to illustrate the multitude of *exóticos*' opinions and concerns about the *beso* and their approaches to resolving these tensions.

Finally, this chapter explores the transformative potential of the *beso* outside of the wrestling ring. When physically given to audience members, fans, and referees, the *beso* allows *exóticos* to symbolically direct the power of their destabilizing performances to their

audience members' own lives. Through the flexibility of desire that the *beso* conjures, its charge may be potent enough to inspire audience members to think differently about the boundaries of the categories of gender and sexuality.

### **The History and Application of the *Beso***

The *beso* as it is used today can be attributed to the legendary *exótico* Rudy Reyna and his companions starting in the 1980s, oscillating between showing affection and threatening to degrade or de-masculinize the opponent (Huth 280). The *beso del exótico* has a very specific target: non-*exótico* wrestlers—or, as many of the *exóticos* called them, 'normal' wrestlers. As May Flower (who was among the first *exóticos* to declare himself publicly gay) confirms, *exóticos* don't use the *beso* as an attack against each other. This means that the *beso* works best against those whose characters are cast as heterosexual and may even express homophobic attitudes. Pereda and Murrieta-Flores argue that this is effective because "homosexuality is still regarded in a negative way but strangely used in wrestling as a power. During the matches, 'gayness' is used as a weapon, in which wrestlers who act as homophobic men are afraid to be too close to the exotic [sic] wrestlers who attempt to use their sexuality against them" (11). The fear and rejection of the *beso del exótico* therefore affirms its power in *exóticos*' matches against other wrestlers.

Because of the *beso*'s symbolic potency, the young *exótico* Sexy Flama argues that the *beso* is the 'boom' of *exótico* wrestling and even the boom of broader *lucha libre*, making it a move that animates the audiences who always chant for more. Both Lady Arcoiris (a.k.a. Sexy Arcoiris), an *exótico* in the early stages of his career, and Yuriko, who began his career in the early 2000s, explain that the *beso* has become so ingrained within

*la lucha exótica* (“*exótico* wrestling”) that it is now an essential part of the *exótico* repertoire.

As Wendy Gaviota, an *exótica* with multiple decades of experience, explains, “It’s because the people ask for it! ...Because as soon as you go up, the people are already like ‘¡Beso! ¡Beso!’ So you feel more fired up, and you feel the adrenaline.”<sup>88</sup> From the perspective of the audiences, Wendy argues that the *beso* has come to constitute part of the tradition of *exótico* wrestling, making it so integral to their characters that it’s almost more transgressive *not* to include it.

Though the sexual orientations of *exóticos* vary, this does not preclude heterosexual *exóticos* from using the *beso*. During our interview, the middle-aged *exótico* La Chona spoke highly of the *beso* and its usefulness within his wrestling repertoire, explaining that the *beso* is so crucial to the *exótico* character that while he personally identifies as heterosexual, his commitment to his *exótico* character is such that he always does a full kiss. The *beso*, then, is a widely recognizable and successful gesture in the *exótico* toolbox for *all exóticos*, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation.

How exactly does the *beso* work within a match? Typically, an *exótico* grabs their opponent and gives the kiss as an act of aggression that catches their opponent off guard. Rather than ignore the kiss or even kiss the *exótico* back, the default is to respond negatively, maintaining and even stoking the charge of the *beso* as an act of aggression rather than celebrating it or neutralizing its dramatic power. As the *exótico* appears to enjoy the *beso* and may celebrate it as a triumph within the ring, their opponent will respond with anger, flailing, fleeing, disgust, or a combination of the four. While the opponent is wiping

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<sup>88</sup> “¡Es que la gente te lo pide! ...Porque desde que subes, la gente ya ‘¡Beso! ¡Beso! Entonces uno se siente como más candela, uno ya siente la adrenalina.”



their face and demonstrating their rejection of the *beso*, *exóticos* have a chance to derail their opponent's plan and formulate a new attack.

Considering the popularity of the move and its integration into *exótico* performance, any *luchador* (“wrestler”) who goes up against an *exótico* should expect the *exótico* to kiss him (or at least attempt it) at some point during the match. Like other holds, pins, and acrobatic moves, the *beso* requires a certain degree of collaboration between wrestlers, as rehearsed sequences (including the *beso*) can make the match more exciting, albeit more predictable. Each wrestler therefore responds to the *beso* as if it's his first time being kissed, even though the *beso* has become commonplace over the years.

Ruby Gardenia, an *exótico* from Tijuana who is famous for touting extravagant feather headdresses, explains that the *beso* draws from and generates drama surrounding ideas about masculinity and power. Ruby jokes that the potency of the *beso* frightens *exóticos*' opponents such that they attempt to escape the *exóticos* kiss, “as if it was going to eat you!”<sup>89</sup> Because it may be ‘frightening,’ an *exótico*'s opponent is certainly welcome to attempt to avoid the kiss. As Cariñoso Jr. (the only *exótico* in this study whose father also wrestled as an *exótico*) explains, their opponents' attempts to avoid the *beso* can add to the humor of the situation, and he's willing to let his opponent escape the kiss in one moment to later plant it on him unexpectedly. While an *exótico*'s opponent may evade the kiss throughout the match, the wrestler is more likely to succumb to the kiss in pursuit of good sportsmanship and with the knowledge that the *beso* is a part of the show that excites audiences. Ultimately, however, allowing oneself to be kissed by an *exótico* still requires a reaction of shock, disgust, or disapproval.

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<sup>89</sup> “¡Como si el beso te fuera a comer!”

*Exóticos* thus rely on their opponents' exaggerated rejection of the *beso* as part of their wrestling strategy. El Demasiado, an ambitious young *exótico* who mentors other *exóticos*, explains that "the kiss is our punishment"<sup>90</sup> that helps to distract the opponent. Many authors such as Nina Hoechtl similarly identify the *beso* as a part of the *exótico's* repertoire of holds used to punish, distract, or provoke their opponents ("Wrestling with Burlesque" 77). The *beso*, then, is a crucial interruption into the opponent's performance, providing *exóticos* with the opportunity to distract and derail both their opponents' momentum and their opponents' performances of masculinity.

Because of the negative reactions performed by their opponents, *exóticos* can implement the *beso del exótico* as a tool for changing the direction of the action and overpowering the other wrestlers. Heather Levi (1997) even goes so far as to describe the implementation of the *beso* as a tool for humiliating their opponents by putting them in sexually compromising positions. As Tabea Huth adds, this humiliating potential of the *beso* energizes audiences, who often shout "*¡Beso! ¡Beso!*" to encourage the *exóticos* to kiss their opponents (280). The symbolically violent potential of the kiss can therefore "hurt the other wrestler more than a strong, open-hand blow" (Rojo de la Vega Guinea 118). Through the *beso*, then, *exóticos* perform the literal and symbolic overthrow of their masculine opponents, who corroborate the *beso's* power through their own reactions.

Diana Taylor's concept of the archive and the repertoire helps us unpack the theatrical and symbolic potential of the *beso del exótico* as an element of *exótico* performance, especially given *lucha libre's* own ambiguous positioning at the convergence of sport, spectacle, and theater. Taylor differentiates between two forms of knowledge and

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<sup>90</sup> "...el beso es nuestro castigo."

memory, the first being ‘archival memory,’ which exists in all forms of knowledge traditionally examined within academia, such as physical documents, texts, maps, archeological remains, films, and other items that are supposedly resistant to change (19). The other form is ‘the repertoire,’ which “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (Taylor 20).

Taylor further explains the repertoire through her discussion of dance, arguing that dances “change over time, even though generations of dancers (and even individual dancers) swear they’re always the same. But even though the embodiment changes, the meaning might very well remain the same” (20). The incorporation of the *beso* into the *exótico* repertoire echoes both the ephemeral and choreographed nature of dance. The *exótico* establishes his performance of femininity, perhaps incorporating a jutted hip or a flip of the wrist, and at some point he grabs his opponent and kisses him on the mouth, which incites the opponent’s protests and possible flailing. The predictable choreography of the *beso* provides an accepted strategy that *exóticos* may use to change the rhythm and direction of the match, while also allowing them to perform homoerotic desire.

While the *exóticos* perform the *beso*, their opponents must also participate in the choreography, performing their rejection or disgust to fulfill their role as the heterosexual, masculine opponent. Yet the *beso* as part of the *exótico* repertoire requires not only the enactment of the choreography by the performer(s), but also the presence of an audience who can witness it and become part of the transmission of this knowledge or memory (20). This ephemeral nature of the repertoire, while capable of evolving over time, points to the collaboration and presence of audiences in recognizing and understanding what *exóticos*

attempt to communicate through their performative repertoire. Even further, as the performance of the *beso* within the *exótico* repertoire ultimately functions to distract or overthrow their opponents, their opponents' collaboration helps communicate a narrative of queer triumph.

### **Bending Hierarchies and Collapsing the Binary with the *Beso***

With the *beso del exótico* in their repertoire, *exóticos* are poised to push against the historically heteronormative grain of *lucha libre*, breathing life into their queer characters who challenge masculine supremacy. Importantly, *exóticos* do so in front of an audience, and the performance of *lucha libre* as a national sport and a staple of Mexican popular culture gives *exóticos* direct access to the public as they perform the *beso*. *Exóticos* therefore engage with audiences on multiple levels: on the one hand, the visual aspects of their performances generate representations of femininity and stereotypes of homosexuality that resonate with broader trends in Mexican culture. Yet these same elements also generate the spectacle of the match and constitute the drama of professional wrestling. The *beso* is therefore a crucial element of the drama and spectacle: it holds the potential to change the direction of the match, highlight and call into question the categorizations of gender and sexuality, and draw attention to the history of queerness within *lucha libre*.

The application of the *beso* holds a mirror to the performances most often taken for granted: performances of gender and sexuality. It forces an interrogation of how the involved *luchadores* engage with and present their own understandings of gender and sexual orientation, allowing for moments of spontaneous creativity, ambiguity, or even the

whole or partial rejection of homo- and transphobic attitudes. As characters that are typically described as ‘gay,’ ‘*de ambiente*’ (“from the gay community”), or even compared to drag queens, *exóticos*’ characters are imbued with what El Demasiado calls “a touch of homosexuality.”<sup>91</sup> The *beso* therefore allows a queer-coded, feminized *luchador*—who may be stereotyped as weak and even sexually passive—to use a move that not only derails his opponent’s attacks, but also allows him to triumphantly dominate the masculine opponent, even if only for a moment. It conveys rebellion against masculine ascendancy, a diffusion of the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, and even a redirecting of gendered power.

In the culture of *lucha libre*, where matches typically pair one performance of masculinity against the other, where physical displays of strength and muscle grapple with one another for dominance, the performance of femininity mixed with masculinity undermines the supposedly natural, complementary division between these two gender categories, providing a moment of resistance to the narrative of masculine dominance over femininity within the sport-spectacle. Mimi Schippers’s concept of ‘gender maneuvering’ helps contextualize how *exóticos* can use their interactions with other *luchadores* to challenge patterns in hegemonic gender relations. Schippers explains that gender maneuvering occurs when individuals take the existing gender order and manipulate, twist, or change it “so as to not reproduce the patterns of structuration that keep the hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity intact” (119). Rather than performing hegemonic masculinity or hegemonic femininity, which would maintain the complementary relationship between these two categories, *exóticos* choose to do both and

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<sup>91</sup> “...toque de homosexualidad.”

neither, mixing in elements of aggression, flirtatiousness, violence, glamor, agility, and dominance that have been stereotyped as either masculine or feminine. *Exóticos* certainly perform dominance, but they are not performing *masculine* dominance; rather, they are dethroning masculine supremacy as the only option for performing dominance. Instead of reproducing the hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity (Schippers 146), *exóticos* create alternative expressions of gender that expand beyond the binary.

To accomplish this, *exóticos* gender maneuver through their physical and artistic performances within the ring. They use their bodies to accentuate dramatic pauses, relying on their *besos*, facial expressions, gestures, feminine-coded mannerisms, and ways of moving through space to communicate their roles within the match. During these matches, a typical *luchador*—with a corporeal performance that is coded as hegemonically masculine, with bulky muscles, dripping with sweat, and a costume that highlights his muscular torso—and an *exótico*, with painstakingly styled hair, sensual costumes with ample cleavage, elaborate makeup, and feminine-coded body movements, the opponents seemingly represent the two sides of the gender binary: masculine and feminine. But what the *exóticos* achieve through their performances is the blurring of these boundaries, relishing in the ambiguities of their gender performances and the coding of their bodies and their gestures that are neither exclusively feminine nor masculine.

By developing their physical, embodied performances that contest existing gender categories, *exóticos* creatively perform gender. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (2006) helps us understand how *exóticos'* performances challenge the concepts of natural and stable gender categories and demonstrate that there are multiple ways of performing gender within *lucha libre*. The *beso* is therefore a particularly useful

tool in manipulating what Judith Butler calls the heterosexual matrix, which presupposes an innate sexual attraction between men and women in which women are the objects of men's sexual desire (Butler 24). The *beso* allows *exóticos* to reverse these established routes of attraction or even bend them. In fact, Huth explains:

obviamente, la posición de los exóticos es una posición muy ambivalente y contradictoria. Eso se manifiesta también en la gesticulación que tienen, ya que dominan a sus oponentes de la misma forma que los luchadores muy masculinos—de una forma sexualmente muy explícita... Así en su gran mayoría los exóticos no sólo se destacan por su apariencia física considerada 'gay', 'vestida' y 'afeminada', sino también por un estilo que oscila entre una cierta elegancia cómica y la directa confrontación corporal luchística. (Huth 280)

obviously, the position of *exóticos* is a very ambivalent and contradictory position. It also manifests itself in the gesticulations they have, since they dominate their opponents in the same way as the very masculine wrestlers—in a sexually explicit way... Thus, the majority of *exóticos* stand out not only for their physical appearance that's considered 'gay,' 'vestida' ["cross-dressed"] or 'effeminate,' but also for their style that oscillates between a certain comical elegance and direct confrontation through physical wrestling. (my trans.; Huth 280)

Just as their opponents can perform masculinity and dominate other wrestlers through sexualized wrestling holds and pins, *exóticos* too can perform masculinity and dominance. They simply do not limit themselves to only performing masculinity or femininity—they oscillate, blur, and bring these categories into contradiction, calling into question the traditional, binary understandings of gender.

While *exóticos* do not limit themselves to performing any single gender category, they do perform many elements ascribed to femininity that would threaten to place them in positions of subordination. *Exóticos'* performance of femininity would typically place them in a lower position within the hierarchy of genders since femininity is assumed to complement and bolster masculine supremacy. Yet *exóticos'* performances do not strip

them of their power. As Schippers explains, individuals can strategically maneuver performances of femininity to manipulate their position(s) in relation to others:

It is possible, then, that even if subservience and deference are part of doing femininity the play of power will depend on how others in the interaction are situated in relationship to the person doing femininity; it will also depend on the meaning of the relationship for those involved. If gender is viewed as relational rather than as a performance, this opens the possibility that doing femininity might, in some circumstances, shift power relations to the advantage of the individual doing so. (Schippers 88)

In describing women within the alternative hard rock scene in the U.S., Schippers explains that many women musicians gender maneuver by referencing their bodies—especially their genitalia and breasts—emphasizing their identities as desiring sexual subjects and a refusal to be sexualized as passive objects of desire (118). By embodying elements of femininity through clothing choices, body movements, and gestures, *exóticos* can also place themselves in positions of sexual power by using sexualized holds and pins like the *beso*, which position *exóticos* as powerful aggressors in relation to their opponents. They exploit the gendering of sexual desire, which, through the complementarity of the gender binary, sexualizes masculinity and subordinates femininity, challenging the idea that performing femininity requires sexual passivity (Schippers 31). In challenging these models, *exóticos* gender maneuver in ways that cast them as desiring sexual subjects through the *beso*, contradicting the definitions of femininity and the boundaries of the category.

José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) concept of 'disidentifications' can help frame the blurring, mixing, and reimagining of gender that *exóticos* perform as they gender maneuver. Muñoz's concept explains how queer performance artists of color can engage in disidentifications, which, in contrast to assimilation or counteridentification, can deal



with dominant ideologies by exposing and reworking them to create new potentials for representing marginalized identities and experiences (31). In the context of *la lucha exótica*, *exóticos* scramble, recycle, and recode the signifiers of the categories of masculinity and femininity, both partially enacting and simultaneously undermining stereotypes associating masculinity with dominance, and femininity with weakness. In doing so they create new, empowering representations of gender creativity and queerness that would otherwise be unthinkable or invisible within dominant culture (Ibid.). Through their mixing of these stereotypes and gender performances, *exóticos* draw from and generate ambiguities that disturb the very gender categories that would typically be used to describe them (Hoechtl, “Lucha Libre” 235). As part of these ambiguous and contradictory performances, the *beso* stands out as the most recognizable, most widely debated element of the *exótico* repertoire, concentrating the symbolic potential of *exótico* wrestling into a highly visible, easily applicable move.

While *exóticos* use the *beso* to undermine understandings of femininity in relation to masculinity, this move can also shape how homosexuality is understood in relation to heterosexuality. Though gender and sexuality are “separate organizing features of social relations,” Schippers explains that they “intersect by mutually constituting, reinforcing, and naturalizing each other” (Schippers 149). In gender maneuvering, *exóticos* therefore contest not only the meanings of femininity in relation to masculinity, but how the affiliations between gender and sexual identities frequently reinforce and naturalize each other, as evidenced by long standing stereotypes in Mexico of homosexual men as inherently effeminate (Carrillo 352). Challenging the links between homosexuality and

effeminacy, then, also allows *exóticos* to contest the subordination of femininity and homosexuality to masculinity and heterosexuality.

The *beso*'s potential to contest the established gender binary and the subsequent hierarchization of genders leads Ximena Rojo de la Vega Guinea to describe the *beso* as a “statement on power and gender relations” in which *exóticos* “are literally fighting against heterosexual masculinity” and “also against binary constructions of masculinity” (118). Rojo de la Vega Guinea’s argument underscores the dominance of hegemonic masculinities, which James Messerschmidt describes as the idealized, culturally sanctioned expressions of masculinity that both legitimate and sustains unequal gender relations (28). As hegemonic gender relations naturalize inequalities between masculinities and femininities, as well as between different masculinities, the performative interventions that *exóticos* make can destabilize routes of power that would traditionally place gay or effeminate men in subordinate positions (Ibid.; Connell 78). Every time that an *exótico* disarms their opponent with a kiss, or applies it against their opponents’ will, *exóticos* resist the assumptions that gay and/or effeminate men lack the strength, power, or dominance of their heterosexual opponents.

*Exóticos* therefore present a unique intervention in performances of gender through their use of the *beso*, and in doing so, they can challenge how gender performances associated with homosexuality can and should be interpreted. Heather Levi explains:

the role of *exóticos* [sic] challenges the place of effeminate gay men in Mexican society, even as it stereotypes them and positions them as *rudos*. Portraying *exóticos* [sic] as having the power to dominate masculine *técnicos*—even if only temporarily, and only some of the time—in itself undermines the stereotype of gay men as contemptible beings incapable of defending themselves (and thus their honor). (*World of Lucha Libre* 176)

Even if only temporarily, *exóticos* can dominate the men who would normally occupy a position of power over them, upsetting the established patterns of power.

*Exóticos* therefore use gender maneuvering to redefine their interactions with other wrestlers by refusing to be victims. By not going along with the script of the weak, gay man incapable of defending himself that Levi describes above, *exóticos* situate themselves in positions of power while placing their opponents in vulnerable positions (Schippers 84). Many *exóticos* recognize this potential to implement the *beso* as a contradiction to heterosexuality and performances of a toxic, hegemonic masculinity (what some participants in this study refer to colloquially as *machismo*). Ruby Gardenia articulated this in our interview: “with just one kiss, I smash heterosexuality. With a single kiss I smash *machismo*.”<sup>92</sup> When I asked how this is accomplished, Ruby explained:

Cómo es posible que un luchador gay, bese a un heterosexual, ¿un macho? ¡Un macho opresor! Que está siendo sumiso, abnegado, trasgredido, aplastado, con un simple beso. Que tiene esa orientación... ¡Con un beso! Con un beso que no tiene nada que ver con el placer carnal! Es con un beso que tiene poder, tan dulce y letal, como la hiedra venenosa. Que te lame, que te mete todo su veneno. Por eso se llama el medito beso... Pero yo digo aplasto. ¡Porque aplasto ese orgullo que nos quiere a nosotros aplastar y hacer invisibles! ...le doy una llave y le hago una sumisión y gana Ruby ‘¡Y ganó la homosexualidad! ¡Y ganó la visibilidad!’ ¡Todo eso ganamos! Pero qué pasa cuando le hago, ‘¡Beso! ¡Beso!’ Te estoy dando dos finales de lucha libre, dos finales de lucha libre, cuando uno de repente me da un foul, y me hace ser visible a la gente, que no soy una mujer, que también tengo pene. Y me pone a espaldas planas, y me ponen unas ¡Uno, dos, tres! ¿Cómo le damos una interpretación?

How is it possible that a gay wrestler kisses a heterosexual, a *macho*? An oppressive *macho*! Who is being submissive, abnegated, transgressed, smashed, with a single kiss. Who has that orientation... With one kiss! With one kiss that doesn't have anything to do with carnal pleasure! It's with a kiss that has power, so sweet and lethal, like poison ivy. That licks you and injects you with its poison. That's why it's called a cursed kiss... But I say *aplasto* [“crush” or “squash”]. Because I smash that pride that wants to smash us and make us invisible! ...I put him in a *llave* [“hold”], and I make

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<sup>92</sup> “...con un solo beso, aplasto la heterosexualidad. Con un solo beso aplasto el machismo.”

him submit and Ruby wins, ‘And homosexuality won! And visibility won! We won all of that!’ But what happens when I do ‘¡Beso! ¡Beso!’ I’m giving you two rounds of *lucha libre*, two rounds, when suddenly he fouls me, and he makes me visible in front of the people, that I’m not a woman, that I also have a penis. And then he puts me on my back, and they do ‘One, two, three!’ How do we interpret that?

Ruby Gardenia’s explanation illustrates the multiple points of contact embedded within the *beso*: it carries the potential to challenge performances of hegemonic masculinity and poison or even smash *machismo*. At the same time, the *beso* presents a symbolic win for homosexuality and queer visibility. Yet Ruby also describes the potential for public rejection and violence against *exóticos*. This serves as a reminder of the power of the *beso* while also underscoring its ephemeral nature and the risks that *exóticos* take in placing themselves in positions of public visibility and scrutiny.

Lady Arcoiris (a.k.a. Sexy Arcoiris), an *exótico* in his 20s who often works closely with La Chona, also explores these tensions between *exóticos*, heteronormativity, and *machismo*. As he explains, *exóticos* are usually *técnicos* (though other *exóticos* and authors have described *exóticos* mainly as *rudos*), meaning that they are focused more on skill and winning matches through sanctioned means. By comparison, the *rudo*, (“rude” or “tough”) wrestlers tend to be the rule-breaking villains who win using brute strength and creativity. In this dynamic described by Lady Arcoiris, *rudos* are also more likely to be a bit *machista* and play into stereotypes of toxic masculinity and homophobia. He explains:

el beso se eleva más al rudo, al macho... Ser un macho, ser muy hombre, y que inclusive el personaje de los rudos es hasta un poco machista. Entonces, la gente al ver eso que, eso que le da un beso a un machista, es como que ‘¡Wow! ¡Dale otro! ¡Para que se le quite!’ Y pues, no falta el compañero que se enoje. Pero pues, no le queda de otra. O aceptar, o enojarse. Pero al final de cuentas, siempre se va a ir contra un exótico. Entonces el beso es la chispa. La gente lo ve para bien, como te digo, porque es eso de ‘¿Cómo vas a besar al macho alfa? ¡Y al machista!’ Y la gente ven eso, y es como

que esa emoción, ‘Qué bueno, y ¡dale otro! ¡Y otro! ¡Y otro! Entonces, es muy padre lo del beso.

[the *beso*] gets more of a rise out of the *rudo*, out of the ‘*macho*’... Being a ‘*macho*,’ [means] being very manly, and even the character of the *rudo* is a little bit *machista*. So, the people see that, they see [an *exótico*] kissing a *machista*, and it’s like ‘Wow! Give him another! ¡*Para que se le quite!*’ [“To teach him a lesson!”]. And, well, you never lack a companion [opponent] who will get mad. But he doesn’t have a choice. He can either accept it or get mad. But at the end of the day, he’s always going to go against an *exótico*. So, the kiss is the *chispa* [“spark”]. The people see it as a good thing, like I said, because it’s like ‘How is he going to kiss the alpha male? And the *machista!*’ And the people see that, and it’s exciting, ‘Wow, awesome!’ And ‘Kiss him again! And again!’ So, the kiss is really great.

Lady Arcoiris’ descriptions of the *beso* show the utility of the move in challenging hegemonic performances of heterosexual masculinity that align with homophobic currents. Beyond contesting this performance, Lady Arcoiris argues that *exóticos* may even teach their opponents a lesson, suggesting the possibility of changing *machista* attitudes.

La Chona also recognizes these dynamics, adding that the *beso* might even lead their opponents to question their own masculinity and performances of *machismo*. Diamantina, another mid-career *exótico*, echoes this, explaining that the *estilo exótico* (“*exótico* style”) mischievously uses the *beso* because of how much the opponent hates it. He even calls the *beso* the ‘downfall of manhood,’ saying that an *exótico* might apply the *beso* against their ‘*machista*’ opponent exactly because the *beso* offends them. That, he explains, is exactly why the audiences love the *beso*: it creates anger, drama, and adds to the spectacle of the match while placing *exóticos* in a unique position of power through which they can contest the stability and supremacy of hegemonic masculinity.

### **Shaping *Exótico* Authenticity Through the *Beso*: From Prequeer to Openly Gay**

When a *beso* is applied during a match, the effects of the *beso* are felt beyond the two individuals involved, its power reverberating beyond the ring and charging audiences with energy. The legendary *exótico* May Flower describes the *beso* as a *chispa*, or ‘spark,’ that ignites audiences, explaining that when *exóticos* use the *beso*, the audience goes wild. Rasputin, an *exótico* from Oaxaca, adds that he uses the *beso* strategically to harness the attention of his audiences: “When an *exótico* kisses a *rudo*, I mean, the public explodes, they party, they celebrate him.”<sup>93</sup> The *beso* therefore extends its reach beyond the interpersonal level among wrestlers out into the public, reinforcing its importance within *exótico* wrestling.

For over 30 years the *beso* has consistently formed part of the *exótico* character and has embedded itself as a crucial aspect of *exótico* wrestling, but it has also given rise to debate as the *beso* becomes ingrained within standards of *exótico* normativity. Some *exóticos* view the *beso* not only as a traditional element of their category, but as a way to establish one’s authenticity as an *exótico*. As Yuriko argues, “If you’re a *luchador exótico*, and you don’t give the *beso*, you’re not an *exótico*.”<sup>94</sup> The *beso*, Yuriko explains, is exactly what audiences expect to see when an *exótico* enters the ring. Failing to use the *beso* means failing to perform as an *exótico*.

This brings into focus several conflicting perspectives on the role of the *beso* as part of the *exótico* repertoire. One camp views the *beso* as a useful tool that celebrates homosexuality, distracts opponents, and establishes an *exótico*’s authenticity while pleasing audiences. Another camp regards the *beso* as a distraction that veers away from the focus on the refined, elegant, and even metrosexual interpretation of the *exótico*,

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<sup>93</sup> “Cuando un personaje exótico besa a un rudo, o sea, el público explota, lo festeja, lo celebra.”

<sup>94</sup> “Si eres luchador exótico, y no das beso, no eres exótico.”

indicating a turn towards vulgarity or decadence that threatens to cheapen the *exótico* category. However, a third perspective suggests that the *beso* has outrun its usefulness. While recognizing the *beso*'s challenge to homophobia and performances of hegemonic masculinity and *machismo*, this faction also suggests that the *beso* reduces the *exótico* character to a gimmick that overshadows their professionalism and skill as wrestlers. Even further, the *beso*'s eclipsing of their training threatens to negate their skills as professional wrestlers and may even come full circle to strengthen homophobic stereotypes of gay wrestlers as weak and powerless.

The *beso del exótico* thus presents a conundrum to *exóticos*: those who use it can fully embody the public's expectations for the *exótico* character (as it stands today), but they may also run the risk of drawing too much attention to a move that can be interpreted as frivolous or even vulgar. Yet those who refuse to use the *beso* may be viewed as incomplete or inauthentic *exóticos* and may have to rely on or even exaggerate other elements of their performances to demonstrate their alignment with *exótico* style. Each *exótico* must therefore grapple with the complexity of the *beso* and what it means for their character while also keeping audiences satisfied.

Part of this tension arises from the history of the *beso* and its application throughout *exótico* history. Despite its current potency, the *beso* has not always been part of *la lucha exótica*. Dizzy Gardenia Davis, a Texan wrestler who became an early pioneer of *exóticos* within Mexican *lucha libre* in the early 1940s, was known for his exaggerated displays of vanity and elegant decadence, but not for using the *beso*. Gardenia Davis is remembered for his practice of handing out white gardenias to the ladies in the front row before stepping into the ring, a move that established him as heterosexual, romantic, and even gallant. He

is also known for relying on his personal assistant to “perfume him, fix his hair, and pamper him,” especially if “his adversary messed up his hair, causing him to run to his assistant, who would fix his hair again” (Rojo de la Vega Guinea 114). Such ‘prima donna’ behaviors, Rojo de la Vega Guinea points out, were often met with boos and jeers from the audience, who were bothered by the excessive vanity and pampering (Ibid.).

The focus on good looks and elegance for *exóticos* continues today. While Gardenia Davis’s performances were not necessarily coded as queer, Rojo de la Vega Guinea argues that the ‘classy elegance’ that he brought to *lucha libre* “was definitely not for machos. Elegance, understood by the hegemonic masculinity of the luchadores, was for the weak” (Rojo de la Vega Guinea 113). The performances of earlier *exóticos* like Gardenia Davis were much closer to ‘dandies,’ but scholars like Nina Hoehchl interpret these performances as ‘prequeer,’ to the extent that they rendered their gender identities and sexual orientations ambiguous through their appearances and peculiarities (“Lucha Libre” 245). May Flower affirms Hoehchl’s analysis by explaining that the *exóticos* prior to his generation did incorporate some elements of homosexuality into their characters, even if they did not identify as openly gay. Today, that prequeer dandyism and ‘peculiar’ elegance have funneled into more overtly queer performances: instead of gallantly handing out flowers and hyper focusing on their appearances, *exóticos* today may choose to kiss their opponents, referees, or even the men in the audience.

Prior *exóticos* may have been prequeer, but their performances of queerness and/or homosexuality were more limited than today, especially without the use of the *beso*. May Flower explains that “the previous *exótico* didn’t kiss openly, he didn’t *jotear* as much.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> “El exótico de antes no daba besos abiertamente, no joteaba tanto.”



In this sense, he describes kissing as part of the performance or act of *joteando*, derived from the word '*joto*,' a slur against gay men. May Flower explains that he and his companions would '*jotear*' in the ring by wrestling 'normally,' and then suddenly incorporating a movement that was read as '*exótico*,' or 'gay,' and that's what audiences learned to expect. "Suddenly, we would put our buttocks against the opponents," and he would try to escape, "and we would grab him out of nowhere and give him the *beso*, and that was the spark that would ignite everything."<sup>96</sup> May Flower's generation thus reimagined and rebranded the *exótico* as decidedly *joto*.

As El Demasiado explains, the previous generations of *exóticos* from the 1960s and 70s, including El Bello Greco, Sergio el Hermoso, and Adorable Rubí, would never have used the *beso*. This is because what May Flower calls "the birth of homosexuality in *lucha libre*"<sup>97</sup> didn't occur until roughly between 1986 and 1991, when he and Pimpinela Escarlata teamed up with *exótico* legend Rudy Reyna and their careers ascended to the national level. As part of the generation of *exóticos* who celebrated their homosexuality within the ring, May Flower (and Pimpinela Escarlata, Rudy Reyna, Polvo de Estrellas, and Cassandro el Exótico) incorporated the *beso* into their repertoire, imbuing it with their cohort's celebration of homosexuality.

Many *exóticos* may remember a time when performing the *beso* and embodying an openly gay character (or simply being gay in public) were revolutionary acts that raised eyebrows and could even incite violence. As he reflected on his influence in *exótico* wrestling, May Flower acknowledged the risks he took back in the 1980s and 1990s:

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<sup>96</sup> "De repente, que le poníamos el pompi al contrario...y que le agarrábamos desprevenido, y que le dábamos el beso, que era la chispa que prendía, que ponía todo."

<sup>97</sup> "...el nacimiento de la homosexualidad dentro de la lucha libre."

O sea, el riesgo que pasé—porque sí fue riesgoso, en aquel tiempo, el haber declarado mi homosexualidad abiertamente ante una comunidad que estaba tan cerrada—Sí, fue riesgoso. Sí fue riesgoso, pero fue algo que en ese tiempo no lo pensé. No lo pensé porque yo siempre fui. Caminé, como yo quise ser, como yo fui.

I mean, the risk I took—because it was risky, at that time, having openly declared my homosexuality before a community that was so closed—Yes, it was risky. Yes, it was risky, but it was something that I did not think about at the time. I did not think about it because I always was. I walked as I wanted to be, as I was.

As the first within their generation to explicitly link the traditional *exótico* performances of delicacy and strength with a homosexual identity, May Flower and his peers risked public exposure, rejection, and potentially homophobic violence. Their highly feminized clothing, ranging from form-fitting bathing suits, fishnet stockings, and long feathered hair, to more tropical, carnival and cabaret-inspired headdresses and costumes, formed a notable departure from the previous generations of *exóticos*' one-armed bathing suits and/or capes. The canonization of the *beso*, then, was what *exóticos* describe as the 'cherry on top' of the newly feminized, reinvigorated imagining of the *exótico* character and an explicit affirmation of a proudly effeminate, openly homosexual wrestler.

As the category has continued to develop, the legacy of Pimpinela Escarlata, May Flower, and other popular *exóticos* such as Polvo de Estrellas and Cassandro el Exótico, has reinforced the openly gay identity of the *exótico* character, overpowering the presence of the heterosexual *exóticos* within the category. While maintaining the relationship between delicacy and strength established by previous *exóticos*, this generation used the *beso* to move beyond disidentifying from hegemonic masculinity to also identifying as a queer character (regardless of the individual wrestler's own sexual orientation). Even further, *exóticos* disidentified from older models of the *exótico* that were more stoic,

heterosexual, and limited to prequeer expressions of gender and sexuality, choosing to reimagine the *exótico* character and integrating the use of the *beso* to create an explicitly gay *exótico*.

This emergence of the *beso* as an element of the *exótico* repertoire coincides with the trajectory of gay rights movements in Mexico, which Arnulfo Vigil describes:

A partir del año 2000 la nómina de luchadores exóticos ha aumentado, al igual que las mujeres luchadoras. Ambas portan otro concepto de cuerpos y de lucha. Gracias a los avances de la liberación homosexual, de una tolerancia cada vez más amplia entre los diferentes sectores de la población, el impulso de organizaciones sociales gays y lesbianas, y algunas medidas favorables de algunos gobiernos (las bodas legales entre personas del mismo sexo) los gays adquieren visibilidad. (Cavazos Torres and Vigil 24)

Starting in the year 2000 the number of *exóticos* has grown, the same as with women wrestlers. Both carry a different concept of bodies and wrestling. Thanks to the advances of the homosexual liberation movement, of an increasing tolerance among the different sectors of the population, the efforts of gay and lesbian social organizations, and some favorable measures from some governments (legal same-sex marriages), the gays acquire visibility. (my trans.; Cavazos Torres and Vigil 24)

The growth of the *exótico* category, as well as the prominence of the *beso* ten years after its boom in the early 90s, parallels what Vigil identifies as the growth of gay rights and visibility in Mexico. La Chona echoes this observation about the connection between *exóticos*, kissing, and queerness, which he explains grew as *exóticos* began to openly belong to the *ambiente gay*, or (“gay community” or “gay scene”) of Mexico.

While *exóticos* like May Flower celebrate the association between *exóticos* and gay visibility, the *beso* still comes under scrutiny for those who question its implications. Raymunda, a middle-aged *exótico* who was undergoing a character and branding transformation at the time of our interview, views himself as an example of the more traditional version of the *exótico* character and hopes to demonstrate to the world that he is

a true, ‘authentic’ *exótico*. To do this, he argues, there must be a reckoning with the use of the *beso* and other perceived ‘vulgarity’ common within *exótico* performances, which he describes as *payasadas* or (“horseplay,” drawing from the word *payaso* for “clown”). He distances himself from other *exóticos* who run around “pulling peoples’ pants down, giving kisses, doing vulgarities in the ring,”<sup>98</sup> and explains: “for me, well, I feel like I’ve always characterized myself, as instead of *besos* or vulgarities, I [actually] wrestle.”<sup>99</sup> He explains that while the kiss was originally used to distract the opponent, he worries that “many people now use it for the pleasure of kissing people. And that, well, it’s not ok. The kiss, for me, as an *exótico* wrestler, I use it for distraction.”<sup>100</sup> In this case, he seems more concerned with the intent behind the kiss than the effect; that is, this quote suggests that *exóticos* shouldn’t use the *beso* because they enjoy it, but instead use it as a tool without any emotional investment or personal enjoyment.

Like other wrestlers who question the necessity of the *beso* within *exótico* wrestling, the young *luchador* Princeso (whose name refutes the conventions of gender in Spanish by merging the equivalents of ‘prince’ and ‘princess’) explains that the *exóticos* haven’t always needed the *beso* to be successful wrestlers. While he does not identify as an *exótico*, Princeso’s *exótico*-adjacent character and performances draw from the older model of *exóticos* established by the prequeer, metrosexual *exóticos*. Like them, Princeso’s character is also gallant, elegant, and vain. Princeso explains that his character is a Prince

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<sup>98</sup> “...que se la pasan bajando los chones, dando besos, este, haciendo vulgaridades arriba del cuadrilátero.”

<sup>99</sup> “Y a mí, que, bueno, siento yo que siempre me ha caracterizado, es de que, en vez de besos o vulgaridades, pues, lucho...”

<sup>100</sup> “...muchas personas ya lo ocupan para el gusto de estar besando a la gente. Y eso, pues eso no está bien. El beso, para mí, como luchador exótico, lo ocupó para distraer.”

Charming type, who, like Gardenia Davis, likes to give a flower to a woman in the audience.

Beyond not using the *beso*, Princeso also avoids doing any of the dancing, kissing, or posing typical of *exóticos*. Instead, his character draws inspiration specifically from El Bello Greco. As he explains,

El Bello Greco es una inspiración para mí, y es como querer retomar lo que él inició. Él es un pionero en la lucha de los *exóticos*. Pero él no caía en eso, en eso del beso, en eso del baile, en eso de ‘Voy y agarro el referí.’ Nada de eso... Él es un muy buen referente a eso, que yo te explico. La... modosidad, la finura, la estampa de pararse en el ring con la delicadeza. Es un perfecto ejemplo. Entonces, yo quiero retomar eso. Por eso, cuando me dicen ‘Tú eres *exótico*,’ ‘No, yo no soy *exótico*.’ No. Yo no doy besos, yo no hago nada de eso. Yo soy, alguien con más, con más delicadeza, con más finura. Yo no caigo en eso de lo *exótico*.

El Bello Greco is an inspiration for me, and I want to pick up where he left off. He is one of the pioneers of the *exóticos*. But he didn’t *caer en* [“rely on” or “fall back on”] that, on the *beso*, on the dancing, on the ‘I’m going to go grab the referee.’ None of that... He’s a good reference for that, what I’m explaining. The... manners, the finesse, the *estampa* [“brand”] of standing in the ring with delicacy. He’s a perfect example. So, I want to resume that. And that’s why when they tell me ‘You’re an *exótico*,’ ‘No, I’m not an *exótico*.’ No. I don’t give kisses, I don’t do any of that. I’m someone with more, more delicacy, more finesse. I don’t *caigo en* [“rely on that”] *exótico* stuff.

From this point of view, the *beso* is synonymous with today’s *exótico* wrestling, but not necessarily in a positive way. For Princeso, there are elements of *exótico* style and *la lucha exótica* that do overlap with his personal style, such as the emphasis on looking good, being refined, and the air of delicacy and vanity. But as he frames the *beso* as the current hallmark of the *exóticos*, he simultaneously distances himself from the contemporary *exótico*, instead evoking the *exótico* performances of over 50 years ago whose sexual orientation was decidedly more ambiguous.

Like Raymunda, Princeso argues that he hopes to revive the elements of the older, ‘original’ interpretation of the *exótico* character. Raymunda and Princeso’s emphasis on portraying the ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ version contradicts the framing of the *beso* by other contemporary *exóticos* as a cornerstone of *exótico* performance. Instead, their interest lies in recreating the elegant, good-looking, vain, and even blue-blooded model of the *exótico*. Whether intentionally or not, these two wrestlers also seek to recreate the model of the *exótico* who does not publicly embrace a gay identity.

### **Interpreting the *Beso*: Navigating Vulgarity, Professionalism, and Family Values**

Though canonized within the *exótico* repertoire, many have criticized the *beso* for being a gateway to other more sexualized moves. *Exóticos* have accused each other of pulling down their opponents’ pants, grabbing their genitals, or engaging in behaviors that otherwise could be considered overtly sexual or even instances of sexual harassment. One participant even proudly mentioned that he had bitten the buttocks of an opponent, which the audience loved, but could be categorized by other *exóticos* as unnecessary or even vulgar. During our interviews, *exóticos*’ descriptions of these behaviors thus allowed them to position themselves as respectable and decidedly not vulgar, while suggesting that other *exóticos* were to blame for vulgarizing and damaging the reputation of their category.

While each *exótico* may have a different comfort level with how they kiss their opponents, the more romanticized and/or sexualized the kiss, the more it draws accusations of vulgarity. Raymunda implied that some *exóticos* use the *beso* for their personal enjoyment, but it appears that the way *exóticos* apply the *beso* doesn’t necessarily come down to sexual orientation. In fact, Wendy Gaviota explained that some heterosexual

*exóticos* might be more likely to exaggerate the *beso* or use it more passionately than their peers:

Hay personas que no son gays, y dan el beso más duro que si lo diéramos nosotros. Hasta la lengua lo meten al compañero, y eso se me hace una vil, grotesca. ¿Sabes? O como, vulgar, pues. A que des un beso de ‘¡Beso! ¡Beso!’ ‘¡Muah!’ Rápido. O sea, sorprende, cuando sorprendes al compañero. ‘¡Muah!’ Ni se lo espera. A que luego, agarran, y lo besan, y todavía hasta que se quedan pegados allí.

There are people who aren’t gay, and they give the *beso* even harder than we would do it. They even use tongue on their opponent, and to me that seems vile, grotesque. You know what I mean? Or vulgar, I guess. Compared to when you give a kiss like ‘¡Beso! ¡Beso!’ ‘¡Muah!’ Fast. I mean, it surprises them, you surprise your companion [opponent]. ‘¡Muah!’ They don’t even know it’s coming. Compared to when they grab one, they kiss him, and then they still stay there, stuck together.

According to Wendy, when *exóticos* overdo the kiss, they lose the element of surprise that supposedly motivates it in the first place. Adding tongue or holding onto the opponent for too long bleeds into the category of ‘vulgar’ for Wendy, which other *exóticos* echo. Yuriko explains that using tongue during a kiss with another wrestler would be to *faltar el respeto*, to ‘disrespect’ the other wrestler. That, Yuriko explains, starts to become vulgar, overdone, or even cheap.

Princeso argues that the *beso* has become so overdone that *exóticos* now kiss one person, then “another, then the referee, the drunk guy in the audience, the guy selling chips. I mean, it doesn’t have credibility anymore.”<sup>101</sup> He adds that some wrestlers who claim to be *exóticos* endanger the entire field of *lucha libre*; they claim to be *exóticos* simply because they kiss people, but he explains:

No son exóticos. No porque tú das un beso a tu compañero, al referí—no son exóticos. O sea, eso no te hace ser un luchador. Piensas porque, o sea, ya le sacaste una risa a una persona—que ni siquiera pagó un boleto, a lo

<sup>101</sup> “...se le meten a otro, al referí, al que está borracho, al que vende las papitas. O sea, ya no tiene credibilidad.”

mejor, por verte—tú crees que eso es ser luchador. Entonces, ellos mismos se creen sus ideas, y piensan... creyendo que son luchadores.

They are not *exóticos*. Just because you kiss your peer, [or] the referee—they're not *exóticos*. I mean, that doesn't make you a wrestler. You think that because you made someone laugh—who might not have even paid for a ticket to see you—you think that that's what it means to be a *luchador*. Then, those same people... start thinking... believing that they're wrestlers.

The *beso* has therefore become so commonplace that for audience members and wrestlers like Princeso, it's not even funny or likable. The kiss may even allow novice wrestlers to claim the label of '*exótico*' and begin their careers without having the necessary skills or training to do so, potentially impacting the industry by lowering wages across the board and making it more dangerous for the other wrestlers involved.

Princeso's use of the term 'credibility' also calls into question the believability of the spectacle. It appears that wrestlers like Princeso worry that the predictability of the *beso* could contribute to the devaluation of *exótico* wrestling and *lucha libre* as whole if the *beso* becomes so predictable that it makes their wrestling seem fake. With this perceived threat to credibility comes the question of value. Diamantina explains that some have come to interpret the *beso* as a cheap trick, especially as the *beso* has become more widely recognized as part of the *exótico* repertoire:

O sea, el ser exótico no es... hacer reír a la gente, como si fuera un payasito. 'Voy a andar besando a todo el mundo. Voy a andar agarrándoles esto y eso.' No. No soy eso, no. Yo creo que, bueno, soy exótico, pero voy a demostrar que sé luchar. Soy delicado, pero a la vez soy recio.

I mean, being an *exótico* isn't... making the people laugh, as if you were a little clown. 'I'm going to run around kissing the whole world. I'm going to go around grabbing this and that.' No. I'm not that, no. I think that, well, I'm an *exótico*, but I'm going to demonstrate that I do know how to wrestle. I'm delicate, but I'm also tough at the same time.



His comments both conflate the *beso* with vulgarity and being a clown, while also hinting that it is tied to unprofessional behavior or even to sexual harassment.

### *Professionalism and Vulgarity*

The question of professionalism connects to a broader anxiety that many *exóticos* share: they worry that they are assumed to be unprofessional or even unskilled wrestlers (i.e., ‘clowns’) who are forced to rely on clichés or moves such as the *beso* for attention. May Flower echoes this concern, arguing that with the proliferation of the *exótico* category and the popularity of *exóticos*, the category has been cheapened by those who take on the character but denigrate the category with vulgarities. Yet the line between ‘denigration’ or ‘vulgarity’ and the traditional content of the *exótico* seems to shift from each *exótico*’s viewpoint. While some view kissing with tongue as essential to the characters, others criticize it; while some view biting their opponent’s buttocks as part of the show, others view it as a vulgarity.

At surface level, it appears that the *beso* itself is contested; however, most *exóticos* do not object to the kiss themselves (even Princeso and Raymunda acknowledge that the *beso* is important). Rather, the issue lies with crossing the line into vulgarity by overtly enjoying the move and pursuing or applying the *beso* for personal pleasure or gratification. At first glance, this may seem like an unfounded concern—so what if *exóticos* enjoy kissing their opponents? Yet the deeper issue that can be drawn out from this point of contention is the preoccupation with being taken seriously as professional wrestlers.

The *beso*—along with all its positive and negative associations—often eclipses the other discussions of *exótico* wrestling. As a move that originally functioned to disrupt the

concentration of the opponent, El Demasiado argues that the *beso del exótico* has now become more of a show than a strategic move, even if it does create positive representations of queer identities. In fact, the *beso* has become so sought-after by audiences that it exasperates *exóticos* like El Demasiado who want to demonstrate their wrestling skills.

As someone who had to undergo the same training as any other wrestler, El Demasiado prides himself on his skills and athleticism. He expresses his frustration with the *beso*, explaining that despite all the training and passion that goes into *exótico* performances, the audiences don't appreciate their work. Instead, El Demasiado explains, the *beso* is the first thing that audiences cheer for when an *exótico* goes on stage: "So you go up, and that's what people start shouting: '¡Beso! ¡Beso!' And that makes me really mad."<sup>102</sup> Frustrated with the lack of appreciation for his effort as a wrestler, he adds:

...cuando nosotros luchamos como se debe... y bajarme bañado de sangre, la gente casi no nos aplaude. Y haciendo el esfuerzo tan grande que hacemos, no nos valoran nuestra sangre... Aunque nos ven luchar, [y] bajar bien bañados en sangre, no les importa. La gente lo que quiere ver es un beso.

...when we wrestle like you should... and I come down covered in blood, the people almost don't applaud us. And with the great effort that we make, they don't value our blood... Even though they see us wrestle, [and] come down bathed in blood, they don't care. What the people want to see is a kiss.

From his standpoint, the physical sacrifices of an *exótico* don't mean much to the audiences unless the performance is consummated with a kiss.

In response to the audiences' lack of appreciation, El Demasiado has begun to strategically limit his use of the *beso* so that his skills can be recognized and appreciated more by the public, a move which he argues has also inspired his peers:

Yo creo que mi idea de no llegar a dar beso, y llegar a golpear—o sea, llegar a ser más fuerte—sí hubo un cambio en muchos compañeros... no se

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<sup>102</sup> "...y luego te subes, y es lo que la gente empieza a gritar: '¡Beso! ¡Beso!' Y a mí me enoja mucho."

quisieron quedar atrás, y también optaron por soltar la misma cantidad de golpes que yo. O sea, que si yo hacía un castigo fuerte, ellos hacían castigos igual de fuertes. Entonces, creo que también fue un poco presionar a una generación de *exóticos* que venía con el mismo trabajo de ‘¡Beso! ¡Beso! ¡Beso!’ a ‘Wow, un castigo fuerte, ¡un castigo poderoso!’

I think that my idea of not kissing, and hitting—that is, becoming stronger—there was a change in many colleagues...they didn’t want to be left behind, so they also chose to give the same number of hits as me. In other words, if I punished hard, they punished just as hard. So, I think it was also a bit of a push for a generation of *exóticos* that came with the same job of ‘¡Beso! ¡Beso! ¡Beso!’ to ‘Wow, what a strong punishment, a powerful punishment!’

By focusing on other moves, El Demasiado has managed to shift the attention from the *beso* to his other areas of expertise and has even inspired other *exóticos* to do the same. He explains that he has since noted a shift in his generation of *exóticos* as they strive to grow beyond the models created for them in previous decades. He explains, “I believe that this new generation of *exóticos* is trying to change that vision, and that we’re not just the *beso* and that’s it, no? We go beyond the *beso*.”<sup>103</sup> This effort to shift the focus of *exótico* wrestling from the *beso* to the *exóticos*’ skill and professionalism may help counter concerns about the stereotyping of *exóticos* as the ‘*payasos*’ or ‘rodeo clowns’ from previous decades, and El Demasiado views this as a shift that legitimates their wrestling while still allowing room for other displays of queer pride.

Along with other *exóticos* hoping to reframe *exótico* wrestling as a skilled, legitimate style that goes beyond the *beso*, Cariñoso Jr. adopted the following slogan: *Los exóticos también luchan* (“*Exóticos* wrestle, too”). He explains that his new motto contradicts the disproportionate focus on the *beso* and the assumption that if you’re an

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<sup>103</sup> “Y creo yo que esta generación nueva de *exóticos* sí está tratando de cambiar esa visión, de que también no solamente somos el *beso*, y ya, ¿no? Vamos más allá del *beso*.”

*exótico*, “you go up, let yourself get hit, or maybe show weakness against your opponents, and kiss... Kissing, kissing, kissing.”<sup>104</sup> He continues:

O sea, también nos metemos unas friegas, unas chingas bonitas, ¿no? Como se dice, o sea, es la patada, el golpe, las planchas, los todo. Los castigos, o sea, demostrar que estamos a tú por tú, tanto con un rudo como un técnico. No es nada más subir, hacer cositas como bailarina—sin denigrar a las bailarinas obviamente—pero, y dar besos a nuestros oponentes. No. Sino demostrar la rudeza que también hay dentro de nosotros como luchadores exóticos.

I mean, we also do some ass-kicking, some pretty good ass-kicking, no? As they say, I mean, the kick, the punch, *las planchas* [“crossbody blocks”], everything. The punishments, I mean, showing that we’re one-for-one, as much as the *rudo* and the *técnico*. It’s not just going up there, doing pretty things like a ballerina—obviously without denigrating what ballerinas do—and giving kisses to our opponents. No. Instead, we demonstrate the toughness that is also within us as *luchadores exóticos*.

*Exóticos* are clearly capable of holding their own against their opponents, and while *exóticos* like Cariñoso Jr. incorporate elements of delicacy and stereotypical femininity within their performances, they also insist on demonstrating that they are professionals who are just as tough as their competitors.

#### *‘Family Values’ and Censorship*

While the *beso* is clearly embedded within *exótico* performance, it inspires debates about family values. When considering the impact of the *beso*, El Demasiado mused, “I mean, if we can see it from the human side, kissing isn’t bad. And for them to prohibit it, because it’s a ‘family audience,’ isn’t right either, because I think children should be

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<sup>104</sup> “...subir, dejar que te peguen, o demostrar tal vez debilidad ante tus oponentes, y el besar... el besar, el besar, el besar.”

accustomed to it, since a kiss is normal.”<sup>105</sup> His comments touch on an important point of contention in ascribing the label of ‘vulgarity’ to the *beso*: children. Many *exóticos* noted that they have children in their fanbases, and some expressed awareness and even concern for their impact on young minds. While El Demasiado argues that children should be exposed to positive instances of kissing between the same gender, others express more caution because the *beso* is often treated as a violation of traditional family values.

Rasputin, for example, is very cautious in his use of the *beso* and its potential impact on his younger audiences. He argues that the use of the *beso* should be “controlled, because, well, there are children that are there who are watching. And often, they ask questions. I had an experience where... the child asked his father, ‘Dad, why does he kiss him? They’re supposed to be opponents, and that’s ok, but is it bad for him to kiss him?’”<sup>106</sup> It seems that rather than being concerned with exposing children to homoaffectivity, Rasputin worries about how children might interpret the intent of the *beso* and its weaponization against other wrestlers. Sidestepping the discussion of homophobic interpretations of the *beso*, Rasputin seems to worry that children could interpret kissing between two men as an act of aggression, harassment, or even violence. While Rasputin clarifies that the *beso* can be used correctly “as long as it’s done respectfully,”<sup>107</sup> he has decided to use it less in his performances, citing its potential to cause confusion or hurt certain feelings or sensibilities. Though it was unclear *whose* sensibilities Rasputin referenced in this moment, many

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<sup>105</sup> “O sea, porque si lo podemos ver desde la parte humana, el besar no es malo. Y que te lo prohíben, porque es un ‘público familiar,’ tampoco está bien dicho, porque yo creo que los niños deben estar acostumbrados, pues un beso es normal.”

<sup>106</sup> “...controlado, porque pues hay niños que están allí que están viendo. Y muchas veces, se preguntan a los niños, y tuve una experiencia, donde el papá le dice, el niño dice ‘Papá, ¿por qué lo besa? Se supone que son contrincantes, y está bien, ¿o está mal que lo bese?’”

<sup>107</sup> “...siempre y cuando se le dé el respeto al rival...”

participants have made it clear that they must tread lightly when dealing with major *lucha libre* leagues and establishments.

The concern with vulgarity and the impact on children reflects broader issues in *exótico* representation and participation in *lucha libre* at the highest levels of the sport. Despite their popularity with audiences, *exóticos* have historically struggled to secure a place within the biggest (traditional) *lucha libre* league in Mexico: the *Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre* (CMLL). As the self-appointed headquarters of Mexican *lucha libre*, the CMLL tends to represent itself as the guardian of tradition, of family values, and of the ‘classic’ *lucha libre* that was born in the first half of the 20th century, rather than adapting to changing public attitudes or new trends in wrestling. While it is the most well-known *lucha libre* establishment and wrestling league based out of Mexico City, the CMLL does not typically employ more than one regular headlining *exótico* at a time.

By contrast, rival leagues such as *Lucha Libre AAA Worldwide* (often referred to as the ‘AAA’ or ‘Triple AAA’), which was founded in 1992 after breaking off from the CMLL, have famously supported *exóticos* and actively recruited them to their league to help develop their characters and their careers. The AAA has been quick to innovate and create new styles of wrestling, advertising, and broadcasting of *lucha libre* events, establishing itself as the more popular, less traditional home of *lucha libre*, though the AAA does not have a home stadium in the center of Mexico City like the CMLL. Many well-known *exóticos* have worked with the AAA for years or even decades, and several commented during our interviews that this was largely due to the support they received from the founder of AAA, Antonio Peña, who many identified as gay. His inclusion and celebration of *exóticos* helped make them a widely popular category of wrestlers among

the AAA audiences, especially since this league has had a broader reach due to its televising of events.

Back at the CMLL, the inclusion of *exóticos* has survived intermittently throughout the years. During the data collection for this study from 2021-2022, the publicly heterosexual *exótico* Dulce Gardenia was wrestling somewhat frequently at the CMLL's Arena México in Mexico City.<sup>108</sup> While his costume, athleticism, and energetic moves certainly align with the *exótico* character, some of the participants in this study pointed out that Dulce Gardenia does not frequently apply the *beso* when he wrestles. Several *exóticos* attributed this to the belief that the CMLL restricts the use of the *beso* among *exóticos*, citing the 'family values' that the CMLL promotes in its wrestling style. El Demasiado describes Dulce Gardenia's situation, arguing, "I also disagree with that there, because they tell you 'You can't kiss another man because it's a family audience,' when for me, the kiss is—uh, well, for me, kissing another person, it doesn't matter the sexuality it has. It's nothing bad... I'm telling you that it's a show, but even so, I think we should naturalize kissing people more than hitting people, right?"<sup>109</sup> As El Demasiado highlights, it is more acceptable within the CMLL for two men to hurt each other than to show each other affection or love. The push for 'family-friendly' performances therefore urges the question of who and what exactly counts as 'family-friendly,' especially if the mere presence of queer wrestlers could count as a violation of said values.

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<sup>108</sup> As of April 2023, Dulce Gardenia no longer appears on the CMLL website's roster of luchadores.

<sup>109</sup> "Es allí donde yo no concuerdo tampoco, o sea, porque te dicen que 'No puedes besar a otro hombre porque es un público familiar,' cuando para mí, el beso es—pues, para mí, besarte con otra persona, no importa la sexualidad que tenga. No es nada malo... Te digo que es como un show, pero aun así, creo que deberíamos naturalizar más el besar a la gente, que de golpear a la gente, ¿no?"

Wendy Gaviota gave another example of an *exótico* constrained by the ‘family-friendly’ standards of the CMLL. Upon joining the CMLL in the 1990s, Pimpinela Escarlata was told “*aquí se viene a luchar*” (“you come here to wrestle”), which served as a warning to Pimpinela to not engage in behaviors such as the *beso*, while underscoring the assumption that *exótico* wrestling isn’t ‘real’ wrestling (Reducindo). Wendy shared that because of these limitations, Pimpinela only worked with the *Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre* for a year. She added that she herself would never belong with the CMLL either, because:

no quiere, se dice así—la palabra correcta—‘putería.’ Allí no quieren putería. Allí no quieren a una mujer como yo. Allí quieren un exótico que sea un cabrón y que nada más haga el papel de un exótico. Nada más como para tener el centro de atención. Nada más. Pero... Dulce Gardenia, sí da beso. Pero muy esporádicamente.

they don’t want, they call it—the correct word—‘putería’ [“prostitution” or “sluttiness”]. They don’t want *putería* there. They don’t want a woman like me. There they want an *exótico* who can be an asshole and who just plays the part of the *exótico*. Just to have him as the center of attention. Nothing else. But Dulce Gardenia, he does give the *beso*. But very sporadically.

Wendy explained that she had trained with the CMLL for a time but was told that they would never hire her and that she was wasting her time because the boss didn’t want people ‘like her,’ most likely referring to her identity as a trans woman, her identity as an *exótica*, or simply labeling her as ‘different.’ That moment, she explains,

...es donde te das cuenta, realmente, que hay una discriminación. Allí es donde realmente te das cuenta [de] que no eres aceptado, que no eres bien visto. Y no porque no tengas las cualidades... sin embargo, no hay la oportunidad. Porque al patrón, no le gusta eso. Así de simple.

...is where you realize, really, that there is discrimination. [That] is where you really realize that you’re not accepted, that you’re not well-seen. And not because you don’t have the qualities... however, there’s no opportunity. Because the *patrón* [“the boss”] doesn’t like that. It’s that simple.



As Wendy explains, *exóticos* and the *beso* fall into the category of ‘*putería*,’ which apparently violates the CMLL’s family values. *Exóticos* are only occasionally contracted for long periods of time with the CMLL, and as Wendy explains, they must be able to convince the public that their character is more of an act than a personal identity. Since the most notable *exótico* wrestlers who have recently had long-term positions within the CMLL are Máximo and Dulce Gardenia, it is worth noting that both have children and publicly claim heterosexual identities, symbolically and discursively distancing themselves from the queerness of the *exótico* character. This CMLL-approved model of *exóticos* maintains the characteristics of the earlier, prequeer *exóticos* from the earlier half of the 20th century, suggesting that the most (or only) family-acceptable *exótico* is the publicly heterosexual one.

Considering the attention that *exóticos* draw, it urges the question of whether the CMLL will ever expand its ranks of *exóticos* and lift any existing limits on the *beso*. However, if there are limits on the *beso* as part of the *exótico* repertoire, *exóticos* within the CMLL will likely continue to contend with their official definitions of ‘family values.’ In the meantime, the apparent censorship of *exóticos* and the *beso* points to the dramatic and symbolic potential of the move. As it has sustained a strong connection with a homosexual identity and functions within *exótico* performances that challenge hegemonic gender relations, the *beso* holds a transformative potential that the CMLL is perhaps unprepared to address.

*Testing the Limits of ‘Family Values’*

Considering the *beso*'s symbolic potential, it is no surprise that the CMLL may seek to curb *exótico* performances. Yet there may be another aspect of *exótico* wrestling that institutions like the CMLL may wish to contain: *exótico* interactions with the public. An analysis of *exóticos* as drag performers helps unpack the impact that they have on audiences and their understandings of gender. Drawing from analyses of drag performances in the United States, Leila Rupp et al. suggest that drag queens embody resistance to the gender structure, push audiences to question the boundaries of heterosexuality, and can even attempt to elicit sexual desire from men in the audience who would otherwise identify as heterosexual (277). Though they do not identify as drag queens, *exóticos* certainly employ similar strategies through their performances that allow them to use flamboyant costumes and humor that undermine the supposed stability and naturalness of gender categories (Rupp et al. 280-6). Through the *beso*, *exóticos* directly challenge the performed identities of the heterosexual men around them.

Beyond kissing their opponents, *exóticos* have also been known to kiss referees, audience members, and fans, making the gesture quite flexible in its nature depending on the context. A kiss given to an audience member—specifically, a man—is not meant to be interpreted as an attack, but as a fun way of interacting with fans. Just as with *exóticos*' opponents, audience recipients may try to run away or avoid the kiss, but many accept it playfully as part of the show.

One of the most popular requests for *exóticos* (beyond asking them to kiss their opponents) is for a kiss for a family member, romantic partner, or friend. May Flower and Yuriko have both experienced women asking them to kiss their boyfriends and husbands. Yuriko laughed as he described his interactions with fans: “‘Oh, kiss my boyfriend,’ or

‘Kiss my husband.’”<sup>110</sup> Yuriko enjoys these interactions, and usually asks the woman, “¿Me lo prestas?” (“Will you lend him to me?”). As Yuriko indicates with the word *prestar*, (“to lend”), the kiss is treated as a temporary foray into homosexuality; the women do not appear to expect this kiss to change their husbands’ sexual orientations to the point that it undermines their own relationship. The *beso* in this case can be viewed as a chance for the man to experiment with homosexual desire within clear contextual boundaries with no threat of social repercussions after the fact. This is possible mainly because it was requested by a third party: the woman who both simultaneously evidences the man’s heterosexual identity while also prodding it with the invitation to the *exótico*.

Cariñoso Jr. argues that giving the *beso* to audience members is something that all fans enjoy watching, even children. In fact, he recounts having a child ask him to kiss his father because he wanted to see his dad’s reaction. Yuriko adds that when children request kisses for their fathers, they might even hold their fathers back so that they can’t escape. When I asked what might motivate a child to ask for an *exótico* to kiss their father, Yuriko explained that it’s all in good fun, and that children are educated to be more open-minded and respectful these days. They don’t request the *beso* to offend *exóticos*; rather, Yuriko argues, they request the kiss because they know it’s all part of the show and they want to be part of the experience.

Through this implementation of the *beso*, *exóticos* allow for the testing of the limits of patriarchal authority and monogamous, heterosexual relationships. As the women and children invite them to kiss the men of the family, they invite *exóticos* to test the boundaries of the man’s heterosexuality. In doing so, they temporarily flex the categorizations of

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<sup>110</sup> “‘Ay, besa mi novio,’ o ‘Besa mi marido.’”

gender and sexuality for themselves and even the people around them, creating space for experimentation, expression, and even discovery.

Schippers describes this process as ‘queering’ sexuality, in which individuals can “in some way step out of, blur, or challenge hierarchical, sexual identities that define individuals as homosexual or heterosexual,” which can be done “through sexual practice and discourse about desire, identities, or sexual practices,” “through sexual maneuvering or by manipulating the meaning and performance of desire within any given interaction” (Schippers 131). In this context, *exóticos* queer sexuality by using the *beso* to involve the men around them in performing non-normative sexual desire, thus blurring and bending the divisions between homosexual or heterosexual. Like drag queens working the crowds at their shows, *exóticos* deliberately work “to arouse desires outside audience members’ claimed sexual identities” (Rupp et al. 286). In doing so, *exóticos* manipulate the symbolic positions of those involved (Schippers 132), at once unraveling the men’s own performances of heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity, while subverting heteronormative expectations that assume that their gender and sexual identities are fixed.

Even if the recipient of the *beso* only momentarily experiences the pull of homosexuality and homoeroticism, this does not negate the potency of the *beso*. Rather, the *beso* makes this moment of flexibility possible, allowing the disidentifications, ambiguities, maneuverings, and creativities of *exótico* performance to temporarily stir the recipient’s own identity and performances of gender and sexuality. As Rupp et al. argue, these types of performances, whether enacted by drag performers or *exóticos*, carry the potential to performatively dismantle binary gender and sexual categories and even subvert heteronormativity (290). This fleeting destabilization, however brief, is enough to call the

audience's attention to the ways in which their lives are structured by the boundaries of gender and sexuality.

## Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates the performative possibilities of *lucha libre* and *exótico* wrestling, centering on the performances of gender and sexual identities, while considering how *exóticos* might interact with the boundaries of the gender binary and systems of gender inequality. As the focal point of the chapter, the *beso* illustrates the malleability of gender performance and the potential for disrupting hegemonic gender relations. I argued that as a performative strategy, *exóticos* use the *beso* to gender maneuver, engaging with and disidentifying from systems of gender inequality on a public stage, pushing past the limits of the heterosexual matrix and urging audiences to recognize and consider new possibilities for identities and expressions beyond the binary.

As the most celebrated element of the *exótico* repertoire among audiences, the *beso* illustrates how performers and performance artists such as *exóticos* can gender maneuver to challenge existing categories and hierarchies. They can choose to incorporate certain movements or gestures such as the *beso* into their performances with the intent of using the embedded ideas about gender and sexuality to their advantage. The choreography of the *beso* can be learned, imitated, and repeated in varying contexts, bringing with it the capacity for expressing homosexual desire and attraction, calling into question the sexual orientation of the recipient, destabilizing patterns of masculine dominance and feminine passivity, and establishing a celebratory, queer identity for the *exótico* character. Rather than indicate a stable, definitive gender identity or sexual orientation, the *beso*

demonstrates how a single gesture and moment of physical contact between two wrestlers can conjure assumptions about sexual attraction, power, and identity, while proving their temporality and ephemeral nature. Through the *beso*, *exóticos* create and perform ambiguity, shaking the structured routes of power around them, and creating space for new modes of expression.

The contested nature of the *beso* and the lack of consensus on its interpretation also point to the ever-evolving nature of the category of *exótico* wrestling. The continuing debates surrounding respectability, professionalism, and vulgarity illustrate the lingering touch of homophobia and transphobia within *lucha libre*, as well as the desire among *exóticos* to demonstrate their value as legitimate wrestlers. The possibility of the *beso* eclipsing *exóticos*' talent reveals the dark side of such a widely popular move: despite its transformative potential and its reception by audiences, the *beso* also threatens to reduce *exótico* wrestling to a stereotype. As younger generations of *exóticos* consider the implications of this move, the *beso* continues to establish many *exóticos*' adherence to the *exótico* tradition and category. As they consider this conundrum, today's younger generations of *exóticos* may ultimately expand their category beyond the *beso* and continue to develop their field.

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*EXÓTICO* DISCOURSES OF RESPECT: GENDER, MARGINALIZATION, AND  
RESPECTABILITY

**Introduction**

*Exóticos* often contend that they are the *chispa* (“spark”) or *la sal y pimienta* (“the salt and pepper”) of *lucha libre*, but their popularity with audiences does not protect them from experiencing interpersonal and institutional discrimination, especially behind the scenes. Audiences may clamor for an *exótico* to kiss their opponent, or cheer wildly when an *exótico* strikes a pose, but this does not undo the normative systems that have restricted *exóticos* and created barriers to their success. Rather than focusing on the raw talent, passion, and charisma that might make an *exótico* successful, this chapter considers the strategies that *exóticos* adopt to maneuver institutional and interpersonal challenges. This chapter examines the overlapping discourses of respect and respectability embedded within *exótico* attitudes and professional strategies, as well as the limitations of *exóticos*’ famously subversive gender performances as part of the broader systems of masculine dominance within *lucha libre*.

*Exóticos* constitute a subculture of *luchadores* with stylistic conventions typically associated with the stereotypes of the effeminate, gay man. Despite the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations present within the *exótico* category, *exóticos* are often assumed to be gay because of how they present and perform their characters. Heather Levi argues that *exóticos* wrestle in drag, embodying the gay stereotype expressed through the

figure of the ‘*maricón/joto*’<sup>111</sup> (both terms for effeminate gay men), while simultaneously challenging the discursive degradation or victimization of the ‘*maricón*’ (152). Through the embodiment of the ‘*maricón/joto*’ stereotypes—which Levi describes as campy and silly, while also including preening, flirting, or kissing (152)—*exóticos* and their characters become subject to the associated forms of homophobic and transphobic discrimination, barriers to training and licensing, and unfair employment practices. As a minority within the ranks of *luchadores*, then, *exóticos* face all the challenges a typical *luchador* might face, but they also experience homophobic and transphobic exclusion, discrimination, and exploitation.

The stereotype of the gay *exótico* foments a celebration of queerness, but Mexican *lucha libre* also celebrates violent performances of hegemonic masculinity. These performances place stereotypically masculine wrestlers “center stage—not only because they are about to fight, but, precisely, because they are male and macho” (Vargas Cervantes 123). Authors frequently link *mexicanidad* (“Mexicanness”) with *lucha libre* and wrestlers’ enactments of masculinity (Vargas Cervantes 123), suggesting that athletes who can perform hegemonic masculinity—in this case, through wrestling—can come to represent the Mexican national culture (Moreno, “Women Boxers” 181; 186). Men who successfully perform hegemonic masculinity within *lucha libre* thus gain access to the privileges built into patriarchal systems of masculine dominance. Estela Serret continues this analysis, explaining that in various societies, those who are configured as prototypical men enjoy the consideration and benefits of embodying what is ‘properly human,’ while the rest—associated with the meanings of femininity—will suffer the effects of symbolic

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<sup>111</sup> Annick Prieur translates ‘*joto*’ as ‘homosexual,’ (30), and she describes ‘*maricón*’ as a more blatantly pejorative term for ‘homosexual’ (25).

dehumanization (139). As discussed in other chapters, typical *exóticos* do not perform hegemonic masculinities as part of their characters; their strategic incorporation of signifiers of femininity, as well as their maneuvering of the gender binary, thus render them vulnerable to the symbolic dehumanization that Serret describes, as well as to frequent expressions of heteronormativity through homophobic and transphobic discrimination.

While *exóticos* work and perform within a category that allows them to contest dominant gender ideologies and expand beyond the gender binary, *exóticos* must also ultimately work within a system that continues to sustain masculine dominance. Within the context of *exótico* wrestling and *lucha libre*, respect is tightly linked with masculinity and woven into concepts of honor and power. Even as *exóticos* expose and potentially contest gender inequality through their individual performances, they operate within a national and cultural context that many authors describe as patriarchal, and in which displays of masculinity can grant individuals access to social recognition and prestige (Núñez-González and Núñez Noriega 2019; Vargas Cervantes 2019; Moreno 2015). *Exóticos* and trans *exóticas*, therefore, may need to claim or perform elements of masculinity to gain access to respect and social status, even as it threatens to complicate their performances of femininity and contradict their gender identities.

This approach to gaining access to respect suggests that *exóticos* implicitly view themselves as starting with a deficit of respect, even as this attitude contradicts their own narratives. Though *exóticos* frequently refer to the practice of reciprocal exchanges of respect between themselves, other *luchadores*, and even the public, many of their own narratives suggest that these exchanges of respect are not guaranteed. Even when *exóticos* faithfully demonstrate and give respect to others, they cite several instances in which this

respect is not granted to them. Considering the links between masculinity and respect in relation to *exóticos*' performances of femininity and assumed homosexuality, *exóticos* struggle to gain respect in situations where men performing a heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity might not. In the case of trans *exóticas*, this becomes an even greater struggle because they perform femininity and identify as women. *Exóticos* (and *exóticas*) therefore encounter a respect deficit in which they must actively work to earn or recuperate respect either by claiming and performing aspects of masculinity, and/or by actively working to control and protect their public image as professional wrestlers.

One of the main strategies *exóticos* use to recuperate respect and to control their public image is through the politics of respectability, a concept articulated by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) in her study of poor, Black Baptist women in the United States from 1880-1920. Higginbotham's framework exposes the tension that these groups experience between contesting unjust laws and the pressure to assimilate to harmful dominant norms. While Higginbotham's concept of the politics of respectability centers on the intersections of gender, race, and class in the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries, it provides a roadmap for the exploration of how communities experiencing marginalization can mobilize against oppression in other contexts.

While Higginbotham's original framework centers Black women's experiences in the United States, I apply it to the *exótico* context to shape a discussion of how *exóticos* as marginalized individuals can similarly wield their agency to employ a politics of respectability to contest discrimination. I do this not to strip Higginbotham's model of its original intent, but to argue that these strategies resonate with responses to marginalization in the Mexican context. By presenting the experiences of *exóticos* through the lens of a

politics of respectability, this chapter considers how *exóticos* experience marginalization based on their pertinence to the *exótico* category and/or queer identities, and how they generate a politics of respectability within their ranks. This can be deployed to nullify negative stereotypes and advocate for civil and political rights for queer communities in Mexico, but it can also establish a normative code of respectability to which *exóticos* and queer populations are expected to adhere. As this chapter will discuss, the determination of who and who does not align with respectable standards also threatens to shift the focus from challenging broader systems of inequality to criticizing, changing, and/or controlling individual behaviors within the *exótico* subculture.

In addition to analyzing the use of the politics of respectability on a large scale, this chapter considers how *exóticos* use respect to structure their interactions and share resources. By integrating themselves into social hierarchies and exchanging respect, as well as cultivating a public perception of *exóticos* as legitimate, professional wrestlers, *exóticos* do more than simply advance their careers: they maintain the survival of their *exótico* category and push back against homophobic and effeminophobic stereotypes that would otherwise undercut and undervalue their potential. Yet these achievements do not come easily. As this chapter will demonstrate, while *exóticos* as individuals are able to performatively subvert gender stereotypes, the strategies that *exóticos* deploy to gain access to respect still require them to perform or claim aspects of masculinity that continue to sustain gender inequality.

### **Overlapping Models of Respect**

Though the *lucha libre* industry includes wrestlers of diverse gender identities, body types, and abilities,<sup>112</sup> this does not guarantee easy or equitable access to resources. *Exóticos* face many of the same hurdles that non-*exóticos* face, including the difficulty of finding a coach or mentor; paying for training, equipment, and costumes; getting hired for events; and eventually being contracted with a professional league. However, *exóticos* face the additional burden of navigating these obstacles while playing a queer character and doing so while potentially being publicly gay or trans, rendering them vulnerable to homophobic and transphobic discrimination on interpersonal and institutional levels.

During our interviews, many of the *exóticos* framed these struggles as part of a conversation about respect, whether they referenced respect between *exóticos*, respect between *exóticos* and other *luchadores*, between *exóticos* and the public, or within the idea of *respectability* and the public perception of *exóticos*. *Exóticos* primarily describe respect as a reciprocal exchange that they used to navigate the barriers that threatened to impact their careers. Polvo de Estrellas, a veteran *exótico* who began his career in the 1980s, explains: “I’ve always said that I don’t come to ask for respect. I come to demand respect. Because I give respect to my peers, then they have no reason to disrespect me.”<sup>113</sup> According to Polvo de Estrellas, *exóticos* can demand the respect of their peers by entering an exchange of respect with them. However, this does not *guarantee* that they receive the respect they demand.

French sociologist Marcel Mauss’ description of exchanges and gift-giving as a facet of social organization helps explain how *exóticos* use respect to structure these

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<sup>112</sup> Many *exóticos* pointed out that *lucha libre* includes *minis*, (“little people”) and wrestlers of varying weights, heights, and physiques.

<sup>113</sup> “...siempre en las entrevistas, he dicho que no vengo a pedir respeto. Vengo a exigir respeto. Porque el respeto yo lo doy hacia mis semejantes, entonces no tienen por qué faltarme el respeto.”

exchanges of respect, and how these interactions can both strengthen social bonds and create rifts. As international studies theorists Volker Heins et al. explain, Mauss' concept of gift-giving describes:

the generous transfer of socially valued objects without any (legal or contractual) guarantee of reciprocation. Reciprocity in gift exchange is asynchronous (there is a time interval between giving and reciprocating) and in kind (the transaction is not measured in monetary terms). This allows gift exchanges to be framed as expressing the social bond rather than as deferred payback for benefits received earlier. (127)

In the *exótico* context, the gift is not a physical object, but a display of respect. Just as with physical gift-giving, exchanges of respect can solidify social bonds, while the failure to participate in this exchange or reciprocate threatens to damage or even 'poison' a relationship (Heins et al. 127). This is because reciprocity is desired, but not required; as evidenced by several examples that *exóticos* provided, their displays of respect to others are often not adequately reciprocated. While this model of reciprocity does not guarantee respect, it does allow *exóticos* to quickly identify breaches in their exchanges and respond accordingly.

In line with this reciprocal model, *exóticos* frequently argue that if they give respect where it is due, they *should* also receive the respect of others. *Exóticos* can therefore justify their presence within a potentially unwelcoming environment by taking advantage of the traction that respect has within Mexican culture. This stems from what Víctor Macías-González and Anne Rubenstein describe as the legacies of respect and honor within 19th century Mexican discourses of nationalism and citizenship, where the ideal Mexican "who represented the nation (and was represented by it as well) had to partake of masculine honor and respectability" (8). Today, these legacies of respect and honor maintain viable avenues

through which *exóticos* can assert their worth. By appealing to the idea of respect as a traditional value, *exóticos* demonstrate their ability to manipulate social norms to push those they interact with to do the same. Yet while the idea of a reciprocal exchange of respect promises mutual understanding, it fails to capture the nuance of these interactions. In fact, if respect was only characterized by the reciprocal model, then there would be no need for *exóticos* to demand respect.

While this approach suggests that respect can be demanded, respect has also been described as a masculine quality that must be performed, recognized by others, and *earned*. In their study of Mexican *narcocultura* (“narcoculture”), Marco Alejandro Núñez-González and Guillermo Núñez Noriega argue that patriarchal societies link respect with honor, which are upheld as desirable, masculine qualities (1-7). They describe the cultural weight of honor, power, and respect gained when men achieve the coveted dominant status of ‘*viejón*’ (“old man”) by performing an honorable and noble masculinity, which includes qualities such as being brave, authoritative, generous, strong, virile, and having control over women (Núñez-González and Núñez Noriega 1-15). By performing these qualities, men can achieve social recognition and access the symbolic capital of the hegemonic, *viejón* masculinity (Núñez-González and Núñez Noriega 2; 9). While this study does not argue that women cannot also attain respect and honor, it describes these traits primarily as aspirational qualities embedded within performances of *viejón* masculinity.

These connections between masculinity, honor, and respect within the context of narcoculture reveal broader trends within other patriarchal systems seen in Mexico, including within *lucha libre*. Even as women’s wrestling and the *exótico* category continue



to grow within *lucha libre*, the broader connections between masculinity and respect shape how *exóticos* access respect during their interpersonal interactions. Though this does not preclude them from demonstrating and exchanging respect in a reciprocal fashion, the embedding of respect within performances of masculinity can require *exóticos* to perform stereotypical elements of masculinity (such as bravery, authority, strength, violence, etc.) or situationally position themselves as masculine to gain the respect of the men around them. In these contexts, *exóticos* perform hegemonic masculinity for their own benefit in ways that sustain the hierarchization of genders, even as these performances might contradict their personal identities and values.

Further, the inclusion of *exóticos* and *luchadoras* (“women wrestlers”) within *lucha libre* does not guarantee that they are given the same degrees of respect as men wrestling as *luchadores*. Masculine wrestlers are still presented as the norm within *lucha libre*, whether in the billing of events, the website design of popular leagues, or even their hiring practices; most wrestlers are overwhelmingly men performing hegemonic masculinity, with *exóticos* and *luchadoras* most frequently brought on for special events or as lead-ups to the headliners. Because of the centering of hegemonic masculinity within *lucha libre*, *exóticos* may be required to put forth greater effort than their peers to gain respect within a context that continues to uphold men as the standard for wrestling. Therefore, regardless of the respect that *exóticos* might show to those around them, the reciprocal model of respect does not guarantee that they will not experience a deficit of respect.

### *Early Training and Discriminatory Gatekeeping*

Each *exótico* emphasized the importance of professional training and gaining access to talented professors, coaches, and peers who helped them develop their skills and characters, but direct access to training has not always been guaranteed for *exóticos*. While any incipient *luchador* may struggle to find a teacher willing to take them on, an *exótico* may face the additional hurdle of finding instructors who are willing to work with queer wrestlers and/or characters. Many of the *exóticos* who started wrestling before the 2000s shared stories of exclusion during their early *lucha libre* training. Polvo de Estrellas describes the exclusion he overcame when he started his training in *lucha libre*: “...the beginning was very difficult. Difficult because I wanted to train, but they told me that the professors didn’t want *afeminados* [“sissies”]—they called me a more vulgar and grotesque word—but they told me they didn’t want *afeminados*. So back then... there was a lot of homophobia.”<sup>114</sup> The young Polvo de Estrellas had identified a gym where he wanted to train, but the *lucha libre* professor repeatedly denied him access until he saw him training by himself. Polvo de Estrellas describes the moment he was finally granted access to formal training:

...lo que veía en la lucha los domingos, yo lo hacía arriba del ring. Yo solito. Entonces, era tanto mi afán de aprender, que una vez me encontró el profesor, el maestro de lucha. Y me dijo ‘¿Quién te ha enseñado todo eso?’ Y le dije ‘Nadie, yo viéndolo.’ Entonces, me dijo ‘Yo te voy a dar clases.’ Él a mí me preparó en seis meses, y me mandó a hacer mi examen profesional. Pero a mí me decía, ‘No queremos putos, ni jotos. Entonces te tienes que comportar, porque a la primera que sepa o me dé cuenta, te vas.

...what I would see at *lucha libre* on Sundays, I would do in the ring. By myself. My obsession with learning was such that one time the professor, the *lucha libre* teacher, found me. He asked me ‘Who taught you all that?’

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<sup>114</sup> “...los inicios fueron muy difíciles. Difíciles porque yo quería entrenar, pero me decían los profesores que no querían *afeminados*—me decían una palabra más grosera y más grotesca—pero me decían que no querían *afeminados*. Entonces luego... había mucha homofobia.”

And I told him ‘No one, I just saw it.’ So, he told me ‘I’m going to give you classes.’ So, he prepared me for six months, and he sent me to do my professional exam. But he would tell me, ‘We don’t want *putos* [masculine form of “bitches”], or *jotos* [a similar derogatory term]. So, you have to behave, because the first time I know or realize it, you’re out.’

Any indication of being *afeminado* would be grounds for his dismissal, forcing Polvo de Estrellas to tailor his behaviors and gender performances to gain access to training. Polvo de Estrellas’ admission into *lucha libre* training was therefore conditional: he could participate only so long as he could adhere to the established heteronormative modes of gender performance. Polvo de Estrellas thus uses his story to situate himself as a dedicated *luchador* who overcame the homophobic barriers in his path through sheer dedication and talent, but also through his ability to perform gender situationally.

In order to demonstrate his legitimacy and gain access to training, however, Polvo de Estrellas was required to perform masculinity in front of his professor and peers within a hostile environment, revealing the gendering of *lucha libre* training spaces. In her research on Mexican boxing and gender, Hortensia Moreno argues that boxing gyms are spaces where a gendered symbolic order is taught and reinforced among the students, making boxing a technology of gender (“El Boxeo” 152). Even with the prominence of women’s boxing, the boxing gym is constructed as a masculine space to the extent that the presence of women is regarded as an invasion into masculine territory (Moreno “El Boxeo” 167). Much like boxing, *lucha libre* is primarily billed as a masculine sport; women and *exóticos* very rarely headline events at the *Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre* (CMLL), and women were not even allowed to wrestle professionally in Mexico City until 1986 (Levi 162-163). Thus, even as women and *exóticos* contest the gender binary through their very

presence in the masculine-dominant field of *lucha libre*, they may be expected to prove their legitimacy to gain respect as professional wrestlers.

Once admitted into a gym or training center, *exóticos* may experience hazing in the form of grueling trainings. Several *exóticos* explained that almost all *luchadores* experience extreme trainings when they first start wrestling, which they described as a rite of passage and as a method for testing the resolve of new wrestlers, potentially driving away those who are deemed to be ‘too weak.’ Wendy Gaviota, a proudly trans *exótica* (who is also a successful esthetician and performer), describes how she was trained: “Previously, *luchadores*, to learn how to hit, they would put up a wall so that they had to be hitting the wall. Hitting the wall. So that it would make their hands tough.”<sup>115</sup> Though Wendy describes this as a process that all *luchadores* would have had to follow, the burden of proving one’s worth falls heavily on *exóticos*.

El Demasiado, a young *exótico* who has mentored several other *luchadores*, describes his own early training experiences that echo what Polvo de Estrellas experienced in the 1980s. El Demasiado explains that he experienced some resistance from other wrestlers when he started training, which he attributed to traditional attitudes: “The majority has the mentality of the old *luchadores*, that if a new *luchador* comes along, they have to make his life impossible to see if he can stand being a *luchador*. If he can take the first days of training, he can handle being a *luchador*.”<sup>116</sup> Beyond the standard hazing of newcomers, El Demasiado adds that the other *luchadores* were hard on him because

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<sup>115</sup> “Anteriormente, hasta los luchadores, para saber pegar, le ponían una pared para que estuviera pegando a la pared. Pegando a la pared. Para que se le hiciera la mano recio.”

<sup>116</sup> “La mayoría de la mentalidad de luchadores antiguos, es que si llega un luchador nuevo, tiene que hacerle la vida imposible para ver si va a soportar ser luchador. Si soportan los primeros días de entrenamiento, va a aguantar ser luchador.”

“...they saw me as delicate. I mean, for them, they didn’t think that I could be a *luchador*... So, every time that they hit me, they thought that I was going to cry, or that I was going to feel bad. I think those were their reasons.”<sup>117</sup> By continuing with *lucha libre* and surviving the training tactics of the older *luchadores*, El Demasiado argues that he proved their assumptions wrong, earning him his place and the respect of his peers. Like Polvo de Estrellas, El Demasiado had to perform masculinity to solidify his access to training by demonstrating his ability, dedication, and strength. While this is not to say that femininity cannot also encompass ability, dedication, and strength, these *exótico* narratives suggest that these traits are typically read within *lucha libre* as inherently *masculine*, even as their own performances of gender trouble the edges of where masculinity supposedly ends, and femininity begins.

Because of the widespread recognition of training as a rite of passage and a measure of a wrestler’s value, *exóticos* emphasize their experiences with training to demonstrate their professionalism, seriousness, and respect for *lucha libre* as a sport. Yet this attitude also threatens to divert attention from the presence of homophobic hazing that may be labeled as ‘standard practice.’ In these scenarios, *exóticos* face the additional burden of defying homophobic stereotypes or even altering their gender performances to avoid being labeled as *afeminado*, weak, or delicate. *Exóticos*, then, must demonstrate their ability to perform qualities deemed as masculine within their context, such as being strong, brave, and *not* delicate. Their entrance into the world of *lucha libre* therefore requires their

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<sup>117</sup> “...me veían delicado. O sea, para ellos, pensaban que yo no podía ser luchador...O sea, que cada vez que me pegaban, ellos pensaban que yo iba a llorar, o que me iba a sentir mal. Yo creo que esas fueron como sus razones.”

successful assimilation into a patriarchal system, even as their individual attitudes, performances, and ideologies resist such systems.

### *Discrimination Behind the Scenes*

Though most *exóticos* argue that homophobic discrimination has improved over the years, this does not preclude them from being harassed, attacked, and insulted. *Exóticos* experience diverse forms of discrimination during their professional careers, forcing them to adapt to barriers created by trainers, event organizers, and other wrestlers, as well as local and national *lucha libre* institutions. May Flower, who has been a pillar of the *exótico* category for decades, explains that in the 1980s he was initially prohibited by the Torreón, Coahuila *Comisión de Box y Lucha Libre* (“Box and *Lucha Libre* Commission”) from getting his license with his current name “because of my condition as a homosexual.”<sup>118</sup> Bizhota, an early career *exótico*, points out that *exóticos* continue to experience unique forms of discrimination when being hired for events and leagues by *promotores* (“promoters”), who might discriminate against *exóticos* because they assume *exóticos* are ‘*de esas preferencias*’<sup>119</sup> (“of those preferences”). Lady Arcoiris, who has wrestled professionally for a few years, shared that a *promotor* had contracted him and later rescinded his offer once he realized that he was an *exótico*. While Lady Arcoiris successfully defended himself by threatening to sue the *promotor* for homophobia, cases like his illustrate the continued discrimination that *exóticos* face.

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<sup>118</sup> “por mi condición de homosexual.”

<sup>119</sup> “of those preferences.”

*Exóticos* may also experience discrimination during trainings and behind the scenes at *lucha libre* events. Bizhota describes his frustrations with homophobic jokes from his peers: “for example, we’re in trainings and someone doesn’t use a lot of force, or something hurt, and they start to say ‘¡Ay!’”<sup>120</sup> or “‘You hit like an *exótico*.’”<sup>121</sup> He adds that “when you can’t take a hit, or when it hurts you, [they say] ‘Ay, it’s because you’re a girl,’ or ‘You’re a *mariquita*’ [homophobic term].”<sup>122</sup> Lady Arcoiris occasionally notices similar homophobic jokes like “‘It’s just that he’s homosexual. Can you believe that he’s going to go into the ring? He’s going to touch me!’”<sup>123</sup> He explains that these jokes continue because he believes other *luchadores* “think that we’re weak, for the simple fact that we have our sexual preferences. So, I think that because of that, they use this stereotype. That *exóticos* are weak.”<sup>124</sup> Because of these assumptions, some *exóticos* shared that they felt the need to prove their strength. Polvo de Estrellas explains: “When I started doing it all—being a *luchador exótico*—there were *luchadores* who didn’t want to wrestle with us. They didn’t want to wrestle with us because—they had that homophobia. So, they hit us harder, and so I also hit them hard, so that they would know.”<sup>125</sup>

Though Lady Arcoiris shares that he has had broadly positive experiences within *lucha libre*, he acknowledges that prior generations faced different challenges: “There was

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<sup>120</sup> “por ejemplo, estamos en los entrenamientos y alguien... no usa mucha fuerza, o le dolió algo, y así ya le empiezan a decir, ‘¡Ay!’”

<sup>121</sup> “Pegas como un *exótico*.”

<sup>122</sup> “cuando no aguantas un golpe, o cuando... te lastima, ‘Ay, es que ya eres niña,’ o ‘Ya eres *mariquita*.’”

<sup>123</sup> “‘Es que él es homosexual. ¿Cómo crees que va a subir? ¡Es que me va a tocar!’”

<sup>124</sup> “piensan que nosotros somos débiles, por el simple hecho de tener nuestras preferencias sexuales. Entonces, este, yo creo que por eso, pusieron ese estereotipo. Que los *exóticos* somos débiles.”

<sup>125</sup> “Cuando yo empecé a hacer todo—a ser *luchador exótico*—había *luchadores* que no querían luchar con nosotros. No querían luchar con nosotros porque—tenían como esa homofobia. Entonces, nos pegaban más fuerte, y pues yo también les pegaba fuerte, para que supieran.”

always someone machista, homophobic, who would say ‘Oh, I have to go against this homosexual... So I’m going to hurt him, to see if he can take it,’ or ‘I’m going to hit him hard, so he doesn’t come back.’”<sup>126</sup> Lady Arcoiris’s narrative suggests a frequently violent reaction towards *exóticos*, echoing how Polvo de Estrellas and El Demasiado had to prove themselves to their peers to gain access to training and to earn their respect. These experiences illustrate the disparities in respect between *exóticos* and their peers: while men who wrestle as *luchadores* are automatically conferred respect, *exóticos* who perform femininity are expected to earn it. *Exóticos*, then, are assumed to be weak until proven otherwise, and by extension are not given respect until it is earned.

These assumptions about *exóticos* are not harmless—despite any claims they made about the situation improving, several *exóticos* alluded to stories of violence and assault committed against *exóticos* in prior decades. In a 2023 interview with *Univision*, Cassandro el Exótico shares an anecdote from the early days of his career in the 1980s: “One day, they gave me a beating in a changing room after having won in the ring. There were a ton of them and they broke my nose. I was around 21 years old”<sup>127</sup> (my trans.; Univision). *Exóticos* have had to survive and resist several forms of discrimination and violence, then, to defend their place within *lucha libre*.

Yuriko, who began his career in the early 2000s, shares an experience of fighting back against homophobia—both literally and symbolically—because of this dynamic. He was forced to defend himself against another *luchador* who attacked him en route to an event because “he’s homophobic... I said, ‘If you respect me, I respect you. If you

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<sup>126</sup> “Y te repito, no faltaba la persona machista, homofóbica, que dice, ‘Ay, me toca subir con este homosexual...Pues lo voy a lastimar, a ver si aguanta.’ O ‘Lo voy a pegar duro, para que ya no venga.’”

<sup>127</sup> “Un día, me dieron una golpiza en un vestidor después de salir del ring y haber ganado. Eran un montón y me rompieron la nariz. Tenía unos 21 años” (Univision).



disrespect me, I also know how to disrespect. Are you going to hit me? I also know how to hit back'... And they had to take him away from me because I was already beating him up."<sup>128</sup> Yuriko interpreted the attack not only as an instance of homophobia, but as an invitation to respond in kind, which justified his violence against his attacker. Even as Yuriko himself spoke previously of reciprocal respect, his response to this attack underscored the belief that respect from men must be earned.

This attitude illustrates Núñez-González and Núñez Noriega's discussion of masculine honor (13). In response to perceived instances of disrespect in which Polvo de Estrellas felt that *luchadores* hit him harder for being an *exótico*, and when Yuriko was attacked, they present their use of force as provoked, justified, honorable, and even admirable. By defending themselves, Polvo de Estrellas and Yuriko both use violence to perform elements of masculinity while gaining recognition and respect for their honorable behavior. Even as they face homophobic attacks that would punish them for failing to perform hegemonic masculinity, they effectively use violence in the face of conflict, successfully performing an element of hegemonic masculinity (Schipper's "Recovering" 91). *Exóticos* therefore find themselves pushed into responding to violence with violence and performing masculinity to protect themselves and to teach their aggressors a lesson. While this response does grant them access to social recognition and prestige, it comes at the cost of engaging in performances of hegemonic masculinity that uphold ideals of masculine dominance and predicate the subordination of their own identities.

*Exóticos* therefore contend with the threat of discrimination and violence while also navigating the barriers embedded within a *lucha libre* career. While some *lucha libre* gyms

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<sup>128</sup> "es homofóbico... Yo dije 'Si me respeta, yo te respeto. Si tú me faltas el respeto, también sé faltarlo. ¿Me vas a pegar? Yo también sé pegar'... Y me lo tuvieron que quitar, porque ya lo estaba madreando."

may be shifting towards showing more acceptance and support towards gay wrestlers, this does not necessarily extend to trans wrestlers to the same degree. Wendy Gaviota celebrates the fact that there is more acceptance for *exóticos* as a category, but she still sees shortcomings: there is acceptance, “sometimes, for *exóticos*, but not for *exóticas*, you understand?”<sup>129</sup> *Exóticas* and trans *luchadoras* still struggle with this, and because there are few wrestlers within the *exótico* category who are trans women, they have had fewer opportunities to push for acceptance and respect on the scale that gay men have done for themselves as *exóticos*. While many *exóticos* explain that they still identify as men even as they perform femininity, *exóticas* explain that they are women—or as Wendy Gaviota says, ‘*damas*’ (“ladies”)—and spend a disproportionate amount of time defending their identities within masculine spaces, even when those spaces are organized around queer identities. As a woman wrestling within the *exótico* category, Wendy is thus forced to negotiate her gender identity within a space built around a masculine one, and within the broader *lucha libre* industry that privileges gay men over trans women. Even within her category, where *exótico* performances undermine the gender binary, trans women like Wendy frequently experience intersecting forms of discrimination.

This leads Estrella Divina, a younger *exótica* who frequently takes to her social media pages to educate the public about her experiences as a trans wrestler, to differentiate herself from the gay wrestlers in the *exótico* category. In an interview with *ESTO*, she explains that while May Flower and Pimpinela Escarlata brought *travestismo*<sup>130</sup> (“cross-dressing”) into the *exótico* category, she sees herself and Wendy Gaviota as the pioneers

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<sup>129</sup> “a veces, para los exóticos, no para las exóticas, ¿sí me entiendes?”

<sup>130</sup> While ‘*travestismo*’ refers to the practice of cross-dressing (usually among men), the identity category ‘*travesti*’ refers to a politicized identity famously articulated by Argentine activist Lohana Berkins (1997) as a politicized gender identity that refuses the binary of man and woman.

who can bring trans issues to the forefront (Rueda). She explains that the topic of trans women in *lucha libre* is newer for the public, citing examples like the use of *vestidores* (“changing rooms”) and respecting wrestlers’ gender identities. She adds that the public may call a trans woman an ‘*exótico*,’ and treat her like a gay man who is crossdressing rather than recognizing and respecting her identity, making it difficult for women like her to fully express themselves (Ibid.). This environment treats all *exóticos* and *exóticas* as men, regardless of their own gender identities, thus negating the experiences of trans women and highlighting the difficulty that *exóticas* have in defending themselves and being respected within *lucha libre*.

Estrella Divina shares an anecdote about being denied access to a dressing room for women:

Me tocó en Triple A que tuve que hablar con los directivos porque en una función iba a entrar al vestidor con las chicas y el coordinador me jala la maleta, me dijo que hombres con hombres. Se cagaron de risa, pero yo me sentí humillada, no me quedó más que ponerme a llorar en el baño, Lady Shani me apapachó, decidí que no iba a tolerar eso, hablé con los directivos, así mejoró un poco, respetaron eso después. (Rueda)

In Triple A [AAA], I had to talk with the directors because at one event, I was going to enter the *vestidor* with the girls and a coordinator grabbed my suitcase and told me ‘Men with men.’ They shit themselves laughing, but I felt humiliated, and I had no choice but to go cry in the bathroom, Lady Shani [another *luchadora*] hugged me, and I decided that I wasn’t going to tolerate that, I spoke with the directors, and things got a little better, they respected that later. (my trans.; Rueda)

By publicly speaking about this incident in her interview, Estrella Divina frames the coordinators’ behavior as disrespectful. In fact, she places herself within a similar narrative to the one used by Yuriko and Polvo de Estrellas, in which she is justified in responding to a disrespectful attack. Yet Estrella Divina does not claim or perform masculinity to access

respect like her peers can, which could force her to negate her identity as a woman. Estrella Divina therefore faces the additional hurdles of misogyny and transphobia, while her masculine counterparts may more readily gain access to respect by being men and having the ability to perform or claim elements of masculinity.

*'El Respeto al Derecho Ajeno'*

While *exóticos* present themselves as the 'salt and pepper' of *lucha libre*, they also anticipate that the public will not always understand, like, or accept their non-normative gender and sexual identities. However, rather than advocating for the acceptance of or tolerance for queer identities within *lucha libre* and the Mexican public, many *exóticos* instead focused on the importance of *respecting* them. During our interviews, Yuriko and Wendy Gaviota both quoted an expression from Benito Juárez, Mexico's first Indigenous president: "*El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz*," which translates to 'Respect for the rights of others is what constitutes peace.' This reverberates with Polvo de Estrellas's explanation: "I don't ask for you to accept me. Just respect me and I'm going to respect you." As he explains it, *exóticos* should be able to exist alongside those who do not accept them, whether on an individual, institutional, or national level, as long as there is mutual respect. Wendy makes an almost identical comment, explaining: "Miss Gaviota, or Wendy Gaviota, doesn't ask you to accept her. She just asks for you to respect her."<sup>131</sup> Through this approach, *exóticos* therefore suggest that they are less concerned with acceptance; they will not beg for the acceptance of others so long as they and their rights are respected.

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<sup>131</sup> "Miss Gaviota, o Wendy Gaviota, no pide que la aceptes. Nada más pide que la respetes."

The concept of *el respeto al derecho ajeno* expands the model of reciprocal respect out beyond the interpersonal: if *exóticos* show respect to the public, and the public respects the existence of *exóticos*, then they can exist in peace. Yuriko explains:

Te lo acabo de decir, *el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz...* Porque si tú das el respeto, ¿qué vas a recibir? Respeto. Pero si tú te ofendes a una persona, vas a recibir lo mismo... O sea, tú vas a recibir lo que tú quieras. Lo que tú des, vas a recibir. Si tú recibes odio, si tú das odio, golpes, es lo mismo que vas a recibir. Entonces, vuelve otra vez mi frase, *el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz*. Respeta para que te respeten.

As I've just told you, *el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz...* Because if you give respect, what are you going to get? Respect. But if you offend a person, you're going to get the same back... I mean, you receive what you want. What you give out, you're going to get. If you receive hate, if you give hate, punches, it's the same as what you're going to get back. So, it comes back to my phrase, *el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz*. Respect so that they respect you.

Yuriko's emphasis on this reciprocal model of respect suggests a perceived control that *exóticos* have over the respect that they receive, implying that if *exóticos* play into the system, they will get the same respect that they give to others. However, this also suggests that any lack of respect shown to *exóticos* could be attributed to the *exótico's* failure to perform respect from their end, shifting the burden to those who already experience marginalization. Thus, the reciprocal model of respect described by *exóticos* echoes the broader framework of the politics of respectability, both individualizing and privatizing the blame cast on people whose behaviors and attitudes do not align with current, normative understandings of 'respectability' (Higginbotham 202).

While the expression *el respeto al derecho ajeno* also suggests a certain distance between the speaker and the 'other', *exóticos* make it clear that expressing tolerance for the 'other' can also be harmful. Polvo de Estrellas brings up an important aspect of the tensions

between tolerance versus respect. He explains: “...tolerance is, ‘Do what you want, ok? But stay away from me.’”<sup>132</sup> Tolerance does not guarantee respect but rather a willingness to allow *exóticos* and their performances of queerness to exist—but separately, pushing them to the margins. Polvo de Estrellas’ comments illustrate the pitfalls of merely being *tolerated* within a social setting: “To say that someone is ‘tolerable’ implies that he/she deviates from a non-specified norm and this latent implication needs a justification” (van Quaquebeke, et al. 189). Social scientists have further expanded this dynamic, explaining that to be “tolerated means to be inferior, powerless and deviant” (Schirmer, Werner, et al. 1053). Being tolerated, then, implies that an individual or group is tolerated despite their supposedly ‘inferior’ and potentially unwelcome presence.

While some authors advocate for acceptance in lieu of tolerance, even acceptance falls short of respect, as Hjerm et al. explain that acceptance is more akin to permissiveness in the wake of expressing tolerance towards someone or something (899). That is, acceptance echoes tolerance because it still implies that the presence of someone like an *exótico* is not wanted or welcome. Thus, an *exótico* can be tolerated or even accepted by other *luchadores*, other *lucha libre* professionals, friends, family, or even the public based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, but this does not guarantee that they are *respected*.

Like the authors in these studies, *exóticos* recognize that receiving tolerance and acceptance can imply that there is something inherently wrong with them, and instead focus on advocating for respect. When describing online debates that he’s had, May Flower signals the division between acceptance and respect by arguing: “I don’t ask that you accept

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<sup>132</sup> “...tolerancia es de que, ‘Pues haz lo que quieras, ¿no? Pero no te me acerques.’”

me. If you don't accept me, *muy respetable* ["very respectable"]. Just respect me so that I can respect you."<sup>133</sup> *Exóticos* thus present respect as a practical goal and a reasonable request in their interactions with others. While understanding that not everybody might agree with, understand, or accept them, *exóticos* like Yuriko, Polvo de Estrellas, Wendy Gaviota, and May Flower suggest that being respected is enough. *Exóticos* therefore value respect as an indicator of their belonging and ability to interact with others; without receiving respect from others, *exóticos* struggle to sustain the legitimacy of their category and successfully navigate an industry and interactions with others who might only tolerate them. Again, this focus on respect underscores the deficit of respect that *exóticos* face as they move within the *lucha libre* industry. While *luchadores* who align with heteronormative expectations and who perform hegemonic masculinity may easily gain respect, *exóticos* must effectively articulate their desire for respect in situations where others may only tolerate or accept them.

### **Controlling the *Exótico* Image**

While *exóticos* experience an initial layer of homo- or transphobic discrimination from the people outside of their category, they may also face compounding discrimination within queer spaces. This includes discrimination within the *exótico* subculture, especially from *exóticos* who seek to control the public image of their category. These efforts to protect a public image resonate with Higginbotham's model of the politics of respectability. Higginbotham argues that Black women deployed a politics of respectability to both "counter racist images and structures" upheld by White Americans, and to condemn "what

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<sup>133</sup> "No pido que me aceptes. Si no me aceptas, muy respetable. Nada más respétame para poder respetarte."

they perceived to be negative practices and attitudes among their own people,” resulting in “assimilationist leanings [that] led to their insistence upon blacks’ conformity to the dominant society’s norms of manners and morals” (Higginbotham 187). Higginbotham argues that they claimed respectability through their manners, morals, and professionalism, which they used to define themselves outside of prevailing racist discourses and assumptions (192). They asserted that being ‘proper’ and ‘respectable’ allowed them to subvert the logic of white supremacy in their quest to condemn and nullify unjust laws, proving that they were worthy of equal civil and political rights (Higginbotham 203; 222).

While this strategy helped disprove racist ideas embedded within White American beliefs, it also resulted in a condemnation of Black Americans who did not conform to dominant norms. As Higginbotham argues, the politics of respectability tends to privatize and individualize racism and discrimination, equating nonconformity with the cause of racial inequality and injustice (203). Therefore, while a politics of respectability is a useful tool in changing public perception, this strategy also allows for the weaponization of the politics of respectability against individuals within the same communities that wield it.

In the case of the *exótico* category, many interview participants articulated their own form of a politics of respectability. These norms were expressed most by the *exóticos* who positioned themselves as authoritative figures within the *exótico* category, establishing themselves either by their age, their years of experience, or their history of queer advocacy. Describing behaviors that did and did not meet their understanding of being a respectful or respectable member of Mexican society, *exóticos* applied these norms to themselves, other *exóticos* and *exóticas*, and queer Mexicans in general. Their criticisms focused on behaviors during Mexico City’s Pride Month celebrations, individual choices



in fashion and modesty, public displays of affection, and displays of professionalism. While the *exótico* use of this politics of respectability helps control the image of the *exótico* category, it also reinforces gendered attitudes towards respect and honor: those who successfully align with established norms of respectability gain social recognition, respect, and honor, assimilating into a masculine-dominant field. Those who perform femininity fall under greater scrutiny than their peers, resulting in trans *exóticas* facing even harsher criticism for their behavior that can be interpreted as threatening to the *exótico* image.

### *Pride Month and Respectability*

While many *exóticos* concur that they are uniquely positioned to serve as public role models for the queer populations of Mexico, the exact representational strategies used by *exóticos* and queer activists come under contention within the discourse of respectability. One particularly salient example of a debated form of queer representation emerged during the interview process. Half of the interviews for this study took place during the month of June 2022, which in Mexico is *El Mes del Orgullo* (“Pride Month”). Like other major metropolitan centers around the world, Mexico City hosts an annual Pride march that traverses the city, with roughly 250,000 people filling the streets during the 2022 *Marcha LGBT de la Ciudad de México* (“Mexico City LGBT March”) celebration (Pacheco).

Because of the plethora of events, promotions, and general attention on the topic, several *exóticos* discussed the current state of activities taking place in honor of the *Mes del Orgullo*. While many were happy to celebrate and promote queer rights (which often brought them publicity and a chance to interact with fans), some *exóticos* expressed

frustration with the Pride march and the behavior of the people who took to the streets. Those who criticized the parade argued that the message it sent to the public was that the queer communities of Mexico do not deserve the public's respect because they themselves are disrespectful to the public during the celebrations. *Exóticos* therefore presented the *Mes del Orgullo* parade as a breach of the reciprocal exchange of respect between queer Mexicans and the public, potentially tarnishing the reputation of *exóticos* and the queer populations they represent. Even further, as *exóticos* attempt to assimilate into a structure that forces them to earn respect, *exóticos* interpret the behaviors of *exóticos* and Pride attendees as a threat to their ability to earn and maintain the respect of others.

For such a large event, then, the amount of public attention (and scrutiny) drawn to the march puts some *exóticos* on edge, especially those who feel or explicitly identify a link between their characters and their personal experiences as queer individuals. Wendy Gaviota explains: “We’re in the *Mes del Orgullo*, LGBTTTI,<sup>134</sup> but I don’t go to the gay marches. I don’t go to those gay marches because I don’t like walking around disfigured. I don’t like to go around showing half my tits, half my butt.” Yuriko similarly cites the *Mes del Orgullo* during his descriptions of how *exóticos* and queer Mexicans engage with the public: “You don’t need to go out on the street doing marches, showing your boobies, your butt, doing your makeup like a woman, for the people to respect you. Respect, we win it for ourselves every day that we want. Because if you give respect, what do you receive? Respect.”<sup>135</sup> In this sense, participating in the behaviors that Wendy and Yuriko describe may in fact be unnecessary or even counterproductive in the quest for respect. Instead,

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<sup>134</sup> Lesbiana, Gay, Transexual, Transgénero, Travesti, Intersexual

<sup>135</sup> “No necesitas salir a la calle haciendo marchas, enseñando las chichis, las nalgas, maquillándote de mujer, para que la gente te respete. El respeto, nos lo ganamos cada uno que nosotros que queremos. Porque si tú das el respeto, ¿qué vas a recibir? Respeto.”

these comments suggest that to receive respect, *exóticos* and their peers must show respect to those around them, and not give the public any cause for criticizing them as a category.

For Wendy, public nudity and scandalous clothing at the Pride marches don't accomplish the goal of demanding respect. She adds:

No necesariamente es ir de enseñar las nalgas a las marchas, porque es lo único que saben hacer, es irse a emborrachar, y faltarle el respeto a la gente que las está viendo, porque van gritando pura leperada. Allí pasan, andan gritando pura leperada. Del Ángel, aquí, a la Alameda, tomadas. Entonces ¿qué es lo que pedimos? Yo realmente, si fuera una persona importante en esas marchas, yo pediría que a las chicas trans—y se los digo en esta entrevista, las chicas trans—que fueran con sus mejores galas, que habemos muchas chicas trans, chicas transgéneros, que vestimos de lo más hermoso, vestidos súper elegantísimos. Yo les pediría una marcha silenciosa, y una marcha donde exijamos el respeto, pero con un silencio. Donde exijamos que los niños gays—que son gays—vayan con sus mejores smokings, los que no les gusta el travestismo, no les gusta el drag, no les gusta nada, vayan con sus smokings, con sus trajes, con sus sacos. Que la gente, en lugar de criticarnos, aún todavía, nos admiren, y digan, ‘Wow, ¿ves qué hermoso se ve ese hombre con el traje?’ La gente, ‘Mamá, ¿viste ese vestido? ¡Qué elegante! Ve esas zapatillas, ¡qué divinas! Mira, ¡cuántos Swarovski lleva en sus pedrerías!’ Esas cosas que nos admiren por eso.

It's not just going out and showing your buttocks at the marches – because that's the only thing they know how to do, is go get drunk and be disrespectful to the people who are watching them, because they go out shouting *pura leperada* [“pure profanities”]. They go out there shouting pure vulgarities, from the Ángel, here, to the Alameda, drunk. So, is that what we ask for? Really, if I was an important person in those marches, I would ask the trans girls—and I'm saying it in this interview, the trans girls—to go out in their best ball gowns—and there's a lot of us trans girls—that we dress ourselves in our most beautiful, dressed super elegantly. I would ask them to do a silent march, a march where we demand respect, but in silence. Where we demand that the gay boys—who are gay<sup>136</sup>—go

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<sup>136</sup> Earlier in our conversation, Wendy and I discussed how the term ‘gay’ serves as an umbrella for many queer identities in Mexico, which can occasionally flatten queer identities into one category. Here, her emphasis on the word ‘gay’ suggests that she is singling out gay men, as opposed to other groups such as trans women or *travestis* (people who cross-dress, often used as a political identity).

out in their best tuxedos, for those who don't like *travestismo*, who don't like drag, who don't like anything—to go out in their tuxedos, with their suits, their blazers. That the people, instead of criticizing us, even still, can look at us and say ‘Wow, do you see how beautiful that man in the suit looks?’ The people, ‘Mamá, did you see that dress? How elegant! Look at those shoes, how divine! Look how many Swarovski rhinestones she has!’ So that they admire us for those things.

Based on Wendy's description, the ideal queer person should be glamorous, elegant, non-sexualized, sober, controlled, and above all, *respectful*. To be justified in your demand for respect, Wendy suggests that you must also present yourself in a manner deserving of respect: no vulgarities, drunkenness, or revealing clothing. Interestingly, Wendy's emphasis on a *silent* march—without the shouts of vulgarities—could also inadvertently impose a silence on queer voices, leaving judgements of value and awarding respect down to how elegant these march participants look and how well they align with ideals of respectability. While a silent march may remove potential fodder for public criticism of the marches by assimilating to dominant norms and values, the impact of marching in silence must also be considered regarding the articulation of and advocacy for their demands, as it pushes *exótico* efforts into seemingly more ‘respectable’ institutional avenues.

Wendy aimed these criticisms of the *Mes del Orgullo* activities at the general queer public of Mexico City, but several *exóticos* extended these types of critiques to other *exóticos* and *exóticas*, personalizing the burden of the reciprocal exchange of respect. As Higginbotham explains, an emphasis on individual behavior inevitably places blame on the same people who are victimized (Higginbotham 202). If an *exótico* or queer Mexican complains about facing discrimination but does not follow what is established to be ‘proper behavior,’ in their personal life (in the *exótico* context, this includes wearing inappropriate clothing, not practicing self-control, and being drunk at parades), they may be accused of

tarnishing their image and bringing this discrimination upon themselves by aligning with existing negative stereotypes.

Describing people who show cleavage or wear scandalous clothing allows both Wendy and Yuriko to condemn these behaviors and simultaneously distance themselves from them. In doing so, they frame themselves as arbiters of respectability, taste, and even normalcy. These critiques become even more powerful when aimed against a specific person, which some *exóticos* did in our interviews. Many *exóticos* described a young trans wrestler as an example of someone whose behaviors do not always align with the described image of *exótico* respectability. She unabashedly wears eye-catching clothing that highlights her physical attributes such as her breasts, waist, and hips, and frequently emphasizes her sexual appeal. During our interviews, some *exóticos* expressed discomfort with her fashion choices and the way she displays her body publicly, but they also tended to immediately neutralize their criticisms by repeating phrases like '*muy respetable*' ("very respectable"), as if to say, 'to each their own.' This approach allows *exóticos* to maneuver themselves out of being accountable for their criticisms of this *exótica* while also allowing them to reinscribe themselves within the discourse of *el respeto al derecho ajeno* and respecting or even tolerating her behavior without accepting it.

While this young wrestler was criticized for showing cleavage and for wearing sexy clothing, men are allowed to wrestle shirtless without complaint, in some cases only wearing small bikini-style underwear that highlight their groin and leaving their legs, torso, and arms exposed. This hyper scrutiny of women's bodies, behavior, and self-presentation—a scrutiny I only saw brought against trans *exóticas*—underscores how many *exóticos* seem to worry about the vulnerability of the *exótico* category and the supposedly

contaminating influence that one person's behavior could have on public perceptions of the category. Higginbotham describes a similar scrutiny of women's clothing, arguing that women's fashions were harshly criticized by Black Baptist leadership (200). Their politics of respectability constituted adhering to "temperance, cleanliness of person and property, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity" (Higginbotham 193) which, in the case of this *exótica*, extends to the perceived sexual purity of her clothing and polite manners. Thus, the individualization of the burden of respectability politics is also heavily feminized, developing implicit associations between femininity, sexuality, and shame.

While unfairly imposed, the concept of feminine shame carries such weight because it holds the potential to symbolically harm men and their ability to access honor and respect. Anne Rubenstein further explains that in Latin American societies where scholars have implemented Julian Pitt-Rivers' model of the 'Mediterranean' honor/shame complex, honor "depends most of all on avoiding shame; and shame results from male heads of households losing control of women in their households, especially sexual control" (2). Men's honor is therefore tightly linked with the sexuality of the women with whom they share familial or romantic relationships, including mothers, sisters, daughters, girlfriends, or friends (Núñez-González and Núñez Noriega 7). The impact that women can have on masculine honor underscores the sexual morality embedded within traditional patriarchal values, resulting in the scrutiny of women's sexuality. Women who fail to comply with these sexual morals are then burdened with shame as a form of punishment (Núñez-González and Núñez Noriega 6). If women can tarnish or even undercut a man's honor and social standing, femininity is then poised to threaten masculinity and its relation to respect.

This both shifts the power and the burden of disruption to women, much like the trans *exóticas* who exist under the public eye.

Though the politics of respectability allows *exóticos* to push back against negative assumptions by aligning themselves with dominant ideals of respectability, manners, and professionalism, it also enables an overt criticism and rejection of those who are perceived to be outside the boundaries of acceptability and dominant sexual morals. This approach pushes *exóticos* and *exóticas* to assimilate into the social structures that would otherwise exclude them, even when they are not guaranteed respect or the same treatment as other *luchadores*. It even enables the symbolic sacrifice of those who are perceived to be outliers—like *exóticas*—to demonstrate the conformity of the rest of the group. This forces *exóticas* and *exóticos* into a state of hypervigilance to protect their image in their efforts to have the same opportunities to gain respect as other *luchadores*.

#### *Heteronormativity and Homonormativity*

Apart from Pride marches and events related to *El Mes del Orgullo*, some *exóticos* also apply the frames of respect and respectability to expressions of same-gender attraction and affection in public. Polvo de Estrellas explains, “you should be respectful. I mean, if I see a kid, I don’t go around kissing my partner, right? Or maybe I just grab his hand...”<sup>137</sup> By censoring himself, Polvo de Estrellas believes he is showing respect to the people around him, especially children. It hints at the status of homoaffectivity within the debates surrounding ‘family values’: certain expressions of affection, (i.e., holding hands) are acceptable around children, while other expressions (i.e., kissing) are not. In Polvo de

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<sup>137</sup> “y debes de respetar. O sea, si yo veo un niño, no ando besando con mi pareja, ¿verdad? O a lo mejor sí lo agarro de la mano...”

Estrellas' comments, being 'respectable,' aligns with broader heteronormative understandings of presentability and respectability within Mexico, and his awareness and concern for the potential negative impact that marches and displays of homosexual affection have on public perceptions of queer identities and rights, suggesting a sense of precarity.

In the context of *exótico* experiences—especially for those *exóticos* who identify as gay, trans, or queer—belonging to the *exótico* category often allows them the space to express their gender and sexual identities. Yet *exóticos* may still feel that their behaviors outside of the wrestling ring fall under scrutiny and must align with norms of respectability and appropriateness. These norms expose the pervasive influence of heteronormative attitudes that *exóticos* encounter. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner explain, heteronormativity is embedded in a society's sense of right and wrong, especially regarding displays and expressions of homosexuality and affection (554). The far-reaching effects of heteronormativity extend beyond “ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture” (Berlant and Warner 554).

These effects of heteronormativity are not merely inconveniences or sources of discomfort. In their study of sexual politics in Latin America, Javier Corrales and Mario Pecheny explain that “heteronormativity places all nonconforming citizens within any polity at high risk of feeling or actually experiencing exclusion, denigration, discrimination, ostracism, victimization by hate crime, forced migration, and neglect by



state security and welfare policies” (3). When *exóticos* express discomfort with displays of homoaffectivity or homosexuality, they are also expressing an awareness of the potential risks of not aligning with heteronormativity.

Another expression of heteronormativity finds itself interwoven with the normativization of homosexual identities and expressions. While criticisms of pride marches and public displays of affection certainly align with internalized dominant heteronormative attitudes, these criticisms may also align with homonormativity, especially when uttered within gay spaces. As Lisa Duggan theorizes, homonormativity does not challenge dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but rather sustains them while promising a demobilized and depoliticized gay culture and constituency (179). Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel applies the concept of homonormativity to the Latin American context, using it to describe the

la institucionalización de una identidad gay hegemónica que se puede convertir en una postura tan excluyente y opresiva como los discursos y prácticas heteronormativas. Uno de los resultados de esta institucionalización de lo homonormativo es que el tema de la libertad sexual resulta desplazado por una ansiedad de definir y visibilizar una identidad gay pública que ignora o condena a aquellos que retan el concepto de la monogamia o a quienes se sienten excluidos por un sistema genérico binario. (Martínez-San Miguel 1040)

institutionalization of a hegemonic gay identity that can become an attitude that is just as exclusionary and oppressive as heteronormative discourses and practices. One of the results of this institutionalization of the heteronormative is that the topic of sexual liberty is displaced by an anxiety about defining and visibilizing a gay public identity that ignores or condemns those who challenge the concept of monogamy or those who feel excluded by a binary gender system. (my trans.; Martínez-San Miguel 1040)

Homonormativity therefore converges with heteronormativity, aligning with heteronormative values and institutions such as monogamy, marriage, or binary gender

categories, while excluding those who fail to meet the standards of respectability. Celebrating in the streets during a pride march, displaying too much cleavage, acting drunk, or showing too much affection in public all threaten to cross the boundary into being read as unacceptable displays of a gay or queer identity, incurring judgment and the exclusionary consequences of hetero- and homonormative systems.

Queer visibility, whether within the *exótico* category or the *Mes del Orgullo* activities, both offers and threatens exposure to *exóticos*, spurring a hyper awareness of public opinion. Wendy's concerns about the *Mes del Orgullo marches*, or Polvo de Estrellas' concerns with regulating public displays of affection to respect family values, reveal an anxiety about the visibility of a queer public identity, and/or the image(s) projected by queer populations. Higginbotham explains that this elevated concern not only prompts critiques of those who don't conform to 'proper' values—in our case, *exóticos* and queer Pride celebrators—but also results in an unwitting reinforcement of negative stereotypes about the same populations (194). By articulating what is and isn't considered proper or respectable, and by openly condemning what they consider to be improper behaviors, *exóticos* and *exóticas* may inadvertently feed negative stereotypes or amplify the negative attitudes towards people that diverge from hetero- and homonormative behaviors and attitudes, even if they belong to their own wrestling category.

For *exóticos*, *exóticas*, and queer individuals who find themselves under scrutiny from multiple directions, the currents of hetero- and homonormativity intersect with respectability politics to compound their marginalization. Susan Stryker explains that queer spaces—especially when they collaborate with activists who organize their work around the sexual orientation categories of homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual—can continue to

inform their understandings based on the dominant culture's binary constructions of gender, which create spaces that are not always welcoming or safe for trans or gender nonconforming individuals (146). These situations therefore create what she describes as a "double sense of marginalization and displacement," where trans people experience exclusion within the dominant culture and again within queer subcultures (Stryker 145). Even within spaces that contest the dominant heteronormative culture, trans individuals may still experience transphobic and/or homonormative exclusion, demonstrating that queer spaces are not automatically inclusive to all queer or trans identities.

Translating this to the *exótico* context where *exóticos* perform a gay or queer identity, *exóticos* may still experience exclusion, criticism, or even transphobic discrimination. Beyond the criticisms of Pride march attendees, of young trans women's clothing choices, or of public displays of affection, I also heard *exóticos* negate their trans peers' identities by mocking their voices and jokingly pointing out the physical traits that they interpreted as masculine. Just like their criticisms of the young trans *exótica* and her clothing choices, these transphobic attitudes were often shared and then immediately retracted and contradicted in the following sentence, where the speaker would proceed to claim that they respect their trans peers and their rights. Within the reciprocal model of respect, this allows the speakers to claim that they are fulfilling their role of the respect exchange, even as they discursively disrespect their peers. Yet within the frame of the politics of respectability, this 'respect' for trans *exóticas* still defines respectability through performing 'proper' morals and heteronormative understandings of a cisgender, hegemonic femininity, simultaneously criticizing trans women while reinforcing negative stereotypes about them. The discursive enforcement of these normativities may allow some *exóticos* to

cultivate what they believe to be a more unified image of the *exótico* category by establishing what is and is not acceptable or respectable, but the burden of these critiques can also fall on the most frequently marginalized *exóticas* and *exóticos* who already operate within a deficit of respect for queer individuals, requiring them to overcome additional barriers to gain respect from others.

### **Structuring *Exótico* Subcultures**

Within the *exótico* subculture, *exóticos* deploy the politics of respectability to establish appropriate behaviors among themselves and other industry professionals with the aim of projecting the image of a well-trained, respectful, and professional *luchador exótico*. On a subcultural level, this includes structuring interactions and exchanges of respect between *exóticos* by organizing them into hierarchies based on age, experience, and personal or professional connections. By successfully integrating themselves into existing social hierarchies and networks of respect and professionalism, *exóticos* gain crucial access to institutional knowledge that allows them to navigate exclusionary systems and the barriers generated by homo- and transphobic discrimination within *lucha libre*. While this does not resolve the deficit of respect that *exóticos* experience in comparison to other *luchadores*, the respect that *exóticos* show to each other allows them to navigate discriminatory spaces and systems.

### *Maintaining Hierarchies*

One of the skills that *exóticos* must develop early on in their careers is the ability to recognize and adhere to the hierarchies established within the *lucha libre* and *exótico*

subcultures. Being able to identify key stakeholders and/or gatekeepers in *lucha libre* networks provides *exóticos* with the practical knowledge and skills necessary to navigate systems that might otherwise exclude them based on their character category, gender performance, or sexual orientation. Once an *exótico* can identify these hierarchies and key players in the *lucha libre* subculture, they can use displays of respect to fortify their interpersonal relationships and ensure smooth movement within the *exótico* and *lucha libre* subcultures.

Like many of her peers, Wendy Gaviota explains that an *exótico* must demonstrate humility where it is due by recognizing their place in the hierarchy. She explains what she likes to teach younger *exóticos*: “First, respect yourself. Second, respect *la bendita* [“the blessed”] *lucha libre*. Because it’s not a game. And third, don’t *faltar el respeto* [“be disrespectful”]. Be a very respectful and humble person.”<sup>138</sup> *Exóticos* thus practice respect as a way of demonstrating their recognition of and adherence to established hierarchies, which helps ensure their acceptance into these communities and their ability to navigate said networks.

Part of knowing when to show respect is knowing to respect your ‘elders,’ including prior generations of *exóticos* and *luchadores* with more training and experience. Wendy Gaviota positions herself as an ‘elder’ meriting respect, adding: “if you don’t respect the hierarchies of *luchadores*, you’re not a good *luchador*. You have to respect the hierarchies. Because they already struggled for 30, 40 years, you know? And they already climbed over the concrete wall.”<sup>139</sup> By showing respect to these older, more experienced wrestlers,

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<sup>138</sup> “Primero, respetarte a tí. Segundo, respetar a la bendita lucha libre. Porque no es un juego. Y tercero, no faltar el respeto, ser una persona muy respetuosa y muy humilde.”

<sup>139</sup> “si no respetas las jerarquías de los luchadores, no eres buen luchador. Hay que respetar las jerarquías. Porque ellos ya le batallaron 30, 40 años, ¿sabes? Y ya pasaron por el muro de concreto.”

young *exóticos* also gain access to intergenerational wisdom and mentoring. Wendy even mentioned coming into conflict with a younger wrestler who didn't take her seriously, which frustrated her since she felt that she could have shared her experiences and institutional knowledge with them. Choosing to overlook these hierarchies by criticizing, scoffing at, or failing to speak respectfully to elders with a higher position therefore generates conflict and gives the young wrestler a bad reputation.

Cariñoso Jr., whose father was the *exótico* 'Cariñoso,' explains that even if you have connections within *lucha libre*—like having a parent who wrestles—you cannot ignore the importance of respecting hierarchies:

Debes de tener cierto respeto hacia los mayores, hacia las personas que te están enseñando, te están entrenando en este deporte, aunque tú ya vengas de una familia luchística, ¿no? Aunque tu papá o tus tías, tu familia, haya sido reconocido dentro de la lucha libre. Debes de mostrarles ese respeto a todos... Porque es de la humildad que tú tienes como persona, como luchador... ¿Cómo me vería yo, con un año dentro de la lucha libre, sin saludar a un luchador que lleva 40 años? ¿Sabes qué me va a decir? 'Oye, qué igualado, ¿no? Pelado, ¿no?' O 'Tú, quién eres?'... Entonces yo creo que deberías de guardarles cierto respeto a todos, a todos luchadores, porque de todos vas a aprender.

You should have respect for your elders, for the people who are teaching you, who are training you in this sport, even if you come from a *familia luchística* ["wrestling family"], no? Even if your dad, or your aunts, your family, have been recognized within *lucha libre*. You should show respect to everyone... Because it's the humility that you have as a person, as a *luchador*... How would I look, with just a year in *lucha libre*, without greeting a *luchador* who's been there for 40 years? Do you know what he would say to me? 'Hey, how entitled, no? Spoiled, no?' Or 'Who do you think you are?'... So I think you should show a certain respect to everyone, to all *luchadores*, because you're going to learn from all of them.

Displays of respect can include greeting other *luchadores* upon entering a room, taking their advice, expressing admiration, and acknowledging their seniority in conversation.

Showing respect to all *luchadores*—especially to those who have seniority—is certainly a safe strategy for a young *exótico* to practice. It also smooths potential knots of tension upon entering the industry, where word of mouth and reputation can shape a young wrestler’s access to professional opportunities.

Though not an *exótico*, Princeso echoes this sentiment: a young *luchador* cannot simply skip the necessary steps in the hierarchy: “It’s just like a school. It’s not like you can jump from primary school to university.”<sup>140</sup> Younger *exóticos* must therefore respect the work done by their elders, especially since many of these ‘elders’ (many are still quite young in wrestling terms) continue to wrestle to this day. By successfully integrating themselves into the hierarchies within the *exótico* category and the broader ranks of *lucha libre*, *exóticos* gain the respect of their peers and may access the mentorship and guidance of other *exóticos*, giving them the tools necessary to understand and successfully move through the social and institutional obstacles within the *lucha libre* industry. This also feeds into the reciprocal exchange of respect: as young *exóticos* enter the field and pay the respect that is due, they in turn establish themselves as respectful and deserving of the respect of others, helping to solidify their belonging to the community and their legitimacy as professional *luchadores*.

### Exótico Kinship

As Heather Levi describes in her ethnographic work, “[i]n the world of *lucha libre*, kinship is important both as a metaphor and as an organizing principle” (53). In this sense, kinship can refer to a community or collective of people that may call themselves ‘*la*

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<sup>140</sup> “Es como una escuela, no es como puedes brincar de la primera a la universidad.”

*familia luchística*,’ (“the wrestling family”), including *luchadores*, trainers, *promotores*, and employees of *lucha libre empresas* (“companies”) (Ibid.). Though there may be biological relatives within the *familia luchística*, Levi is clear in describing the importance of affective ties within this type of wrestling family, which *exóticos* also reproduce on a subcultural level.

Ruby Gardenia, a charismatic *exótico* from Tijuana, describes her relationships with two of the *exótico* pioneers of the 1980s, Rudy Reyna and Pimpinela Escarlata:

¡Claro que conozco a Rudy Reyna! Es mi abuelita, es la mamá de Pimpinela Escarlata, siempre la tenía como mamá. Entonces yo soy la nieta, pues... Entonces, tenemos entre los luchadores exóticos, somos las tías, como las mamás, y las abuelas también, o sea, es como esa protección, o con quien te identificas, quien te apadrina, quien te ayuda.

Of course, I know Rudy Reyna! She’s my *abuelita* [“grandmother”]! She’s the mother of Pimpinela Escarlata, who I’ve always had as a mother. So, I’m the granddaughter, then... So, between us *luchadores exóticos*, we are the aunts, like the mothers, the grandmas too, so it’s like that protection, with whom you identify, who sponsors you, who helps you.

For *luchadores* within the already-marginalized category of *exótico*, and especially for those who identify as gay, trans, or queer in their personal lives and may have contentious relationships with their biological families (Huth 265), accessing this type of *exótico* mentorship can allow them to forge family ties and kinship networks, which provide support and protection.

*Exóticos*’ familial relationships echo other forms of kinship networks, such as those within drag or ballroom families in the United States. As Emily Arnold and Marlon M. Bailey describe, ballroom culture “consists of two primary features: anchoring family-like structures, called houses, and the flamboyant competitive balls that they produce” (174). This makes houses a crucial part of the queer ballroom network, which is led by house



mothers and fathers as they “provide support for their children to compete in balls as well as to survive in society as marginalized members of their communities or origin” (Ibid.). Some *exóticos* described living with or near other *exóticos* as a household, while others described relationships more akin to mentorship and protection, such as what Davide Passas’ identifies between drag queens on the show *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Passas argues that drag families “are to be seen as places of personal and financial support, a refuge for young gay men who have been rejected by their ‘real’ families and have financial problems” (127). Though this quote emphasizes the difference between biological and chosen families, its description of the emotional and financial support provided by drag parents points to the ways in which these family structures step in to provide the support needed by people who experience marginalization.

Just as Levi describes the *familia luchística* that is composed of multiple members of a *lucha libre* community (who may or may not have relationships outside of the *lucha libre* context), *exóticos* too can create and insert themselves into *exótico* family structures that provide similar forms of support and mentorship. Even for *exóticos* who are on good terms with their biological family members (which many *exóticos* expressed in my study), the additional support provided by their *exótico* kin can help them with networking, career choices, training, character design, and creating a safe space.

Kinship networks also provide young *exóticos* access to shared status and name recognition. Established *exóticos* who have strong bonds with younger *exóticos* can follow the *lucha libre* tradition of passing down a character name to children, family members, or friends. Wrestling with another wrestler’s characters allows a *luchador* to wrestle with an already-developed character and access the institutional and social networks of their

relatives, gaining a more direct route to training and professional opportunities. Wendy Gaviota, who has biological and social ties to Pimpinela Escarlata, describes how Pimpinela mentored her when she first started wrestling. Before Wendy had chosen the name ‘Miss Gaviota,’ Pimpinela had offered to give her a name: “He tells me, ‘Take the name ‘La Hija de Pimpinela Escarlata,’ [“The Daughter of Pimpinela Escarlata”]. And I never wanted to, because I wanted to make a story on my own.”<sup>141</sup> While Wendy quickly found success on her own as Miss Gaviota, wrestling as ‘La Hija de Pimpinela Escarlata’ would have given her the additional advantage of name recognition. By showing respect to her peers and strengthening her relationship with Pimpinela, Wendy’s case illustrates the potential rewards for successfully navigating these relationships: name recognition and support.

Kinship networks therefore allow *exóticos* (and other *luchadores* in general) to draw on name recognition and mentorship to smooth their navigation through the *lucha libre* industry. In the case of *exóticos*, who may experience marginalization through homophobic or transphobic discrimination, the support provided by these relationships can give them an advantage. However, these advantages must also be sustained by demonstrating respect. As Cariñoso Jr. explained, a young wrestler can certainly leverage their relationships to gain access to *lucha libre* spaces, but without properly demonstrating respect, they risk being labeled as spoiled or unprofessional. Touting such an attitude threatens the hierarchies in which a *luchador* is placed and may simultaneously reinscribe his lower status. For *exóticos* who do not have these sorts of kinship relationships with other *exóticos*, they are in a doubly vulnerable position, where the sexual and gender

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<sup>141</sup> “Me dice ‘Ponte ‘La Hija de Pimpinela.’” Y yo nunca quise, porque quise hacer una historia, yo.”

identities of their characters are already marginalized. It is therefore even more crucial for *exóticos* in these positions to engage in proper exchanges of respect and adhere to the standards and networks established within the *exótico* subculture to enhance their careers.

### *Professionalism and Respect*

Though *lucha libre* attracts audiences with the promise of drama and spectacle, *exóticos* also emphasize that *lucha libre* is a professional sport. To be successful in *lucha libre*, *exóticos* must demonstrate their legitimacy as consummate wrestlers by expressing their respect for *lucha libre* as a sport and as a violent profession that must be taken seriously. Venus Radiante, an *exótico* in his first year of professional wrestling, explains that *lucha libre* is a serious sport, and “you must respect the ring, love this sport literally, because it’s not easy, honestly. It’s not easy.”<sup>142</sup>

Beyond respecting *lucha libre*, *exóticos* also strive to generate respect for their category and prove its legitimacy. El Demasiado explains this dynamic:

Pues, mi generación más nueva tiene... es que ahora también nos dedicamos a ser fuertes. Es que había un momento en que el *exótico* sí sabía luchar, pero también era parte de un gran show de comedia. Tenías que ser la parte divertida de la *lucha libre*. Y hasta la fecha, los promotores también te contratan, y también te piden que seas prácticamente el payaso de la *lucha libre*. Cuando nosotros los *exóticos* también sabemos luchar, sabemos llavear, sabemos aplicar castigos. Y en mi caso, yo he tratado de no ser el payaso de la *lucha libre*, sino ser un luchador, pero con preferencia sexual diferente, pero que sabe luchar, y sabe subir al ring y darle todo, igual que cualquier luchador.

Well, my newest generation now... now we dedicate ourselves to being strong. There was a time when the *exótico* did know how to wrestle but was also part of a big comedy show. You had to be the fun part of *lucha libre*.

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<sup>142</sup> “respetar mucho al ring, amar este deporte literalmente, porque no es fácil, la verdad. No es fácil.”

And to this date, *promotores* contract you, and they still ask you to practically be the *payaso* ['clown'] of *lucha libre*. When we *exóticos* also know how to wrestle, we know how to *llavear* ["do holds"], we know how to apply *castigos* ["punishments"]. And in my case, I've tried to not be the clown of *lucha libre*, but rather a *luchador*, but with a different sexual preference, but who knows how to wrestle, and knows how to climb into the ring and give it my all, just like any other *luchador*.

El Demasiado's concern with proving the legitimacy of the *exótico* category underscores the discourses of respectability and professionalism in which *exóticos* attempt to prove that their wrestling abilities match or exceed those of their non-*exótico* peers.

Within the context of the politics of respectability, Higginbotham argues that professionalism can be framed as synonymous with respectability, using professional training as a weapon to "disprove the charges of incompetence, immorality, and unreliability that were leveled at black domestics" (216). This discursive engineering of professionalism rings true within *exótico* circles, where they emphasize their professional training to challenge any negative stereotypes about *exóticos*. As El Demasiado describes, negative stereotypes about *exóticos* such as being the weak, comedic clown of *lucha libre*, or not being competent wrestlers, threaten to undercut the legitimacy of *exótico* wrestling as a category. Highlighting their extensive professional training, however, allows *exóticos* to position themselves as skilled, powerful wrestlers with every right to be fighting in the ring.

For this reason, almost every *exótico* emphasized in their interviews that all *luchadores*, regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, or physique, pass through the same training. May Flower explains: "The training and learning is the same, the same for minis, women, *exóticos*, men—I mean, it's a contact sport, for which you have to be 100%

prepared. So, a woman can go up against a man. A woman can wrestle with a man.”<sup>143</sup> He adds: “*Exóticos* train with men, with women... It’s really nice, because... it’s the same capacity that a woman, an *exótico*, and a man have to train...”<sup>144</sup> Training can therefore serve as an equalizer of sorts: if all wrestlers pass through the same training, then all wrestlers should be prepared to encounter opponents with any physique or style. This capacity allows *exóticos* to use the politics of respectability frame their training as evidence of their legitimacy as wrestlers and protect their rightful place within the *lucha libre* social landscape.

Yet the assertion that all *luchadores*—regardless of gender identity—pass through the same training overlooks who is considered to be the prototype for all *luchadores*. This attitude suggests that the training for men is the benchmark for all other *luchadores*, especially given the original development of *lucha libre* as a masculine sport and the historic exclusion of women from major wrestling leagues. Women and *exóticos*, then, are meant to train *like men* to be considered strong enough and well-prepared, though they are unlikely to ever be considered *equal to* men. Framing men’s wrestling as the neutral benchmark for wrestlers, therefore, naturalizes masculinity as superior to femininity, and sustains the centering of masculinity within the industry. Calling oneself a trained, professional *exótico* who has trained like a man, then, has the potential to reify masculinity as the ideal within *lucha libre*.

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<sup>143</sup> “La enseñanza y el aprendizaje es lo mismo, tanto para minis, como para mujeres, como para exóticos, para hombres—o sea, es un deporte de contacto, al que tienes que estar preparado al 100%. De allí, una mujer se puede enfrentar con un hombre. Una mujer puede luchar con un hombre.”

<sup>144</sup> “Los exóticos entrenamos con los hombres, con las mujeres... Es algo muy bonito, porque... es la misma capacidad que tiene la mujer, el exótico, y el hombre para entrenar...”

## Conclusion

As *exóticos* and *exóticas* engage with the world around them, their narratives about giving, receiving, and earning respect help them explain their interactions with others. Yet the complex models of respect presented in this chapter—whether reciprocal or earned—reveal how respect aligns with the broader gender structures of Mexican culture and *lucha libre*. Though *exóticos* argue that they engage in reciprocal models of respect, the deficit of respect that they experience underscores the challenges of moving through the world of *lucha libre* as queer individuals and wrestlers.

Even as *exóticos* and *exóticas* contest heteronormativity and binary understandings of gender, the prevalence of masculine dominance within *lucha libre* pushes them to assimilate into gender systems that might negate their own gender or sexual identities. Because of their marginalized statuses, *exóticos* must recuperate respect in ways that other wrestlers do not, often relying on elements of masculinity associated with the ideals of honor and respect. Even the development of *lucha libre* as a masculine sport, with the historic exclusion of women and *exóticos*, reifies men and hegemonic masculinity as superior to femininity.

*Exóticos'* turn to a politics of respectability therefore bridges—or attempts to bridge—many of the gaps in respect that *exóticos* experience by allowing them to execute finer control over their public image. By establishing themselves as respectful, well-trained, and professional wrestlers who adeptly navigate institutional and legal systems, *exóticos* can defy stereotypes of their category that might paint them as unprofessional and unskilled *payasos*. While the reciprocal exchanges of respect and the crystallization of idealized, professional *exótico* behaviors allows *exóticos* to discursively create a positive

image of their category, these approaches simultaneously allow for the scapegoating of *exóticos* and *exóticas* for failing to meet the standards of respectability. This defensive tactic certainly provides *exóticos* with tools to control the public perception of their category but threaten to reinscribe the marginalization of *exóticos* and *exóticas* whose behaviors and performances do not align with heteronormative and homonormative expectations. This chapter therefore opens conversations about marginalization within the *exótico* context and the costs of discourses that aim to shape definitions of respectability among *exóticos*.

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## CONCLUSION

This dissertation has expanded discussions of *exóticos*' performances and their interactions with systems of gender inequality. Yet the impact of *exótico* performances do not limit themselves to the theoretical or even the physical realm. Because of their roles as professional athletes and entertainers, their actions have social consequences, with the potential for changing the minds of other wrestlers, employers, audiences, and even the public. *Exóticos* do not deny that their deviance from dominant gender norms can incur scrutiny, criticism, discrimination, or even violence, but they clearly demonstrate that as individuals, they are able and willing to take that risk, and do so before large audiences.

The chapters of this dissertation have therefore demonstrated both the potentials of *exótico* performance, how they experience these roles, and how they have navigated the *lucha libre* industry. *Chapter 1: Defining 'El Exótico'* explored the diversity of the *exótico* category and the many elements that *exóticos* use to define themselves. It contended that *exóticos* have drawn on performances of femininity over the years, later channeling their character design to play a more overtly stereotypically gay character in recent decades. While this pro-gay model celebrates a queer sexual identity, it also threatens to erase the presence of trans *exóticas*, who perform femininity, but do not identify as men. *Chapter 2: Performing 'El Exótico'* argued that *exóticos*' performances of gay characters are made possible by performing femininity, which conjures stereotypes of homosexuality. Performing gender and sexual identities that contradict the gender binary and the heterosexual matrix allow queer *exóticos* to generate ambiguity surrounding their personal

gender identities and sexual orientations, which in turn gives them space to experiment with 'coming out' or develop tacit understandings with their family members. Though this ambiguity can be beneficial, it also holds the potential to shift the burden of maintaining familial approval to *exóticos* by pushing them to adhere to other norms of gender performativity. *Chapter 3: 'El Beso'* examined how *exóticos* channel their performative potential into a moment that contests heteronormativity and hegemonic gender relations. Though powerful, *el beso del exótico* also provokes criticisms of vulgarity, and some *exóticos* argue that it threatens to diminish their reputations as skilled professional wrestlers. *Chapter 4: Exótico Discourses of Respect: Gender, Marginalization, and Respectability* argued that despite *exóticos'* popularity, they continue to experience discrimination, and have learned to articulate discourses of respect and a politics of respectability to navigate oppressive systems, even at the cost of redirecting harm towards members of their own category. Through these arguments, this dissertation contributes to discussions about gender performativity and how individuals can strategically gender maneuver to shape gender inequality and contest homophobic and transphobic discrimination.

While the potentials of *exótico* performances are promising, there are also areas that merit recognition and further analysis. This dissertation has uncovered several inconsistencies during the interviews with *exóticos*: *exóticos* occasionally seemed to express misogyny and anti-femininity in their comments about women or other *exóticos*, even as they performed femininity themselves. Additionally, because of the diversity of the *exótico* category and the acceptance of a variety of gender and sexual identities, there are opportunities for the appropriation and exploitation of the *exótico* character by

cisgender, heterosexual *exóticos* who do not feel responsible for promoting respect for queer identities, even as they financially benefit from their *exótico* careers. Further, as several of these chapters have demonstrated, the *exótico* category has the capacity to function as a transphobic space.

Yet this dissertation has made it clear that *exóticos* are not a monolithic category. The variety of identities, backgrounds, and beliefs leaves space for contradictions within the category, allowing for *exóticos* to simultaneously express both inclusive and harmful sentiments at any given moment. However, it is also this space for contradiction that allows *exóticos* to harness the ambiguity of their category to spur important conversations and potentially change the attitudes of others. Finally, the *exóticos* who participated in this study shared a sense of pride in being *exóticos*, and nearly all seemed committed to working within the category and improving the diversity and openness of *lucha libre* through their presence.

### **Contributions**

At present, this dissertation serves as the largest study employing ethnographic and interview methods to document *exótico* experiences. The data from the *exótico* interviews reflects their narratives about their own lives, documenting how they frame their experiences and their strategies for evading strict categorization. Ultimately, this dissertation demonstrates not only the complexity and diversity of this category, but also the commonalities across *exótico* performances and their potential for engaging with and contesting exclusionary systems. This dissertation therefore provides rich data to support

ongoing dialogues about *exótico* performances, their impact on *lucha libre*, and their strategies for moving through discriminatory spaces.

*Exóticos* have shown themselves to be highly cognizant producers of knowledge. The opportunity to speak with *exóticos* and conduct field research radically changed my understanding of *la lucha exótica* and the analytic lenses that I applied as I wrote. This highlights the value of conducting human subjects studies and collaborating with interview participants in a way that allows them to share their expertise. *Exóticos'* critical, insightful comments on their own experiences and their narratives about gender and sexuality were deliberate and carefully crafted. This dissertation should serve as a reminder of the importance of recognizing and respecting the agency of participants in human subjects studies and their roles as experts and producers of knowledge in their own fields. As a researcher, my job was to follow their lead as I analyzed and wrote about the data they generously shared with me.

As a White, cisgender scholar from the Global North, I have had to critically interrogate the binary categories that I have used to describe *la lucha exótica* and *el estilo exótico*. In attempting to explain their identities and performances through the lens of gender, I also had to reflect on how I applied labels of 'masculinity' and 'femininity,' as well as the danger of reinscribing *exóticos* within the same binary systems that they often seek to evade. As they expertly eluded simple labels and outright refused certain gender and sexual categories, the *exóticos* in this study have reminded me of the importance of critically interrogating both the geographic and temporal contexts of these labels. Further, these *exóticos* reminded me of their agency and ability to contest and change their relationships with these categories. This dissertation, then, provides a window into how

researchers can unwittingly enforce gender normativity even as they seek to understand and deconstruct it.

*Exóticos* and their performative strategies provide a crucial example of how individuals can wield their agency to contest heteronormativity and hegemonic gender relations before their audiences, but also in their individual actions, constantly shifting and evading the labels that an academic audience may seek to pin on them. *Exóticos* exemplify how individuals are capable of interacting with, maneuvering, and manipulating the rigidity of social categories, even as these same structures threaten to restrict their movements and punish them for their transgressions against the norms. They demonstrate the potential slipperiness of these categories, as well as the room for creative interventions. Readers of this dissertation and audiences of *exótico* performances therefore stand to gain a richer understanding of how performances at the intersections of theatrical, melodramatic, and athletic genres hold the potential to both deploy and contradict signs, stereotypes, and cultural knowledge about gender and sexual identities. Yet even as we attempt to study the categories that supposedly describe *exóticos*, they resist being subject to the binary frameworks that we seek to systematically unravel.

### **Limitations**

The data analyzed for this dissertation came from 16 semi-structured interviews, totaling roughly 32 hours of data. While this is a wealth of data for a dissertation, this is not necessarily a representative sample of all *exóticos* within Mexico. The added complexity of the participants' data, including one *exótica*, and one *luchador* who did not describe himself as an *exótico* per se, complicate the generalizability of this data. Further,



the recruitment strategies used for connecting with participants were not randomized. Rather, *exóticos* were mainly contacted via social media and snowball sampling, which allows for sampling bias to occur. Future researchers may want to consider methods of recruitment through official channels, such as through registries at local and national offices for *lucha libre* unions, gyms, and oversight offices.

The data collection was initially hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions on events and public gatherings resulted in fewer *lucha libre* events and potentially limited employment for lesser-known *exóticos*, which may have pushed them to leave the field. The pandemic similarly complicated my efforts to find locations where *exóticos* regularly convene. While I did contact *lucha libre* gyms, CMLL, and Lucha Libre AAA about observing trainings and connecting with *exóticos*, these efforts did not result in any connections. Even though Lucha Libre AAA famously features *exóticos*, whether through bureaucratic obstacles or concerns about my intentions, I received no response from their offices either. Those who look to study *la lucha exótica* may have better results speaking directly with *exóticos* than attempting to follow institutional pathways or relying on *lucha libre* leagues for contacts, especially since *exóticos* may not have complete liberty to speak honestly about their employers. Future researchers may want to start by visiting gyms in person and collaborating with *exóticos* to attend their preferred gyms to collect data.

### **Future Research**

This is a preliminary study of *exótico* experiences that was developed on a scale appropriate for a dissertation. The aim of this research has been to contribute to an ongoing, growing conversation about *exótico* wrestling. There was certainly room for expansion of

this project, and many directions that future researchers could take to collect more field data in addition to interviews. In my own future research, I would like to deepen my collaborations with *exóticos*, giving them more space to articulate their experiences outside of formal interviews, aid in the data analysis process, and give them opportunities to respond to the theories and analyses within this dissertation.

Beyond extending this initial research, I would also like to expand my focus. This dissertation has centered on *exóticos*' experiences and performances, but I would also like to extend this research into an analysis of representations of *exóticos* and queer subjectivities within *lucha libre*. There have been several *lucha libre*-themed documentaries and films, including *Los exóticos* (2013), directed by Michael Ramos Araizaga, which features interviews of several well-known *exóticos*; *Flores en el ring* (2006), directed by Patricia Martínez, which centers May Flower and Polvo de Estrellas; the short film *En tierra de machos, el joto es rey* (2017), directed by Dave Carrizosa, which follows a fictional young *luchador*'s struggles with his sexual identity and his father's role as an *exótico*; and the multiple documentaries about Cassandro el Exótico's career, including those directed by Michael Ramos Araizaga (2010) and Marie Losier (2018). This includes the biographical film *Cassandro* (2023), directed by Roger Ross Williams, in which Gael García Bernal portrays Saúl Armendáriz on his journey to becoming Cassandro el Exótico.

While media about *exóticos* appears to be blossoming, this handful of cinematic representations of *exótico* experiences is still sparse, opening debate as to why they have received relatively scant attention compared to other non-*exótico* *luchadores*, such as El Santo and Blue Demon, who starred in dozens of films in the late 20th century. With the

proliferation of media that is beginning to center *exótico* experiences, this also begs the question of whether *exótico* media could become mainstream or even co-opted. As with other representations of marginalized experiences produced on a large scale, the commodification and consumption of these representations may result in shifts in portrayals of *exóticos* and even their personal experiences.

Though *exóticos* do not constitute an official category (yet) within W.W.E. in the United States, there are queer wrestlers who have been equated with *exóticos*, such as Sonny Kiss. Similarly, Mexico, Japan, and the United States have circuits of international exchange among wrestlers, which merits future exploration. The possibility for international comparisons between *exóticos* and wrestlers within other countries may help foment the spread of their performative strategies and styles, opening the door to future collaborations and inspiration for activists and performers alike.

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## BIOGRAPHY

Catherine (Catie) Prechtel is graduating from Tulane University with a Ph.D. in Latin American Studies in 2023. From 2021-2022 she participated in the Visiting Investigator Program at the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios de Género at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico City. In 2018 she completed her M.A. in Spanish & Latin American Studies at American University in Washington, D.C.. She completed a Fulbright fellowship as an English Teaching Assistant in León, México after receiving a B.A. in Spanish and a B.A. in Anthropology from Pacific University in 2014. She is interested in expanding her research on gender, performance, and wrestling to transnational contexts across Mexico, Japan, and Latin America.