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Abstract

Masks serve as particularly effective props in contemporary Mexican and Chicano performance art because of a number of deeply rooted traditions in Mexican culture. This essay explores the mask as code of honor in Mexican culture, and foregrounds the manner in which a number of contemporary Mexican and Chicano artists and performers strategically employ wrestling masks to (ef)face the mask-like image of Mexican or U.S. nationalism. I apply the label "performance artist" broadly, to include musicians and political figures that integrate an exaggerated sense of theatricality into their performances. Following the early work of Roland Barthes, I read performances as "texts" in which the wrestling masks function as immediately recognizable *signs*. I argue that by masking their identity and alluding to popular mask traditions, Chicano and Mexican performance artists make visible, and interrogate, the national face(s) of power.

Keywords

nationalism, Chicano, Mexican, performance art, contemporary performance, tradition, culture, wrestling masks, U.S., nationalism, face, power, identity, sign

(Ef)Facing the Face of Nationalism: Wrestling Masks in
Chicano and Mexican Performance Art

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La máscara está debajo del rostro.
The mask lies underneath the face.
—Jorge Luis Borges

Octavio Paz, in an essay from his classic collection of essays *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), evokes the metaphor of a *mask* to represent the facade that he perceives as inherent to the Mexican national character: “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*” (my emphasis, 29). While exaggerated in terms of its unique application to the Mexican national character, Paz’s metaphor of the mask applies more accurately to the practice of nationalism itself. To talk of “the nation” is to *mask* difference(s)—to reconfigure and cover contradictory features in order to represent and lift the face of an imaginary national community. Of course, this process of nationalistic masking goes largely unnoticed. The dominant image of the nation so effectively covers subaltern viewpoints that the majority assumes the legitimacy of hegemonic ideology without even noticing that a masking process is taking place. Political ideas slip unnoticed within the concept of “common sense” to carve a transparent mask in the shape of the “general interests” of “the people.” This

invisible mask obscures the features of Others, thus erasing their needs and perspectives from public view.¹

If nationalism obscures difference, nevertheless, society's marginalized Others can make use of masks as a performance strategy that calls attention to the masking process. In his examination of the modern novel, Bakhtin observes the frequency with which rogues, clowns, and fools, "life's maskers," use masks to underscore the falsity of social authority. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson expand on Bakhtin's observations: "Bakhtin means that *they expose the conventional masks of life; they are in fact, life's unmaskers*" (352; my emphasis). In this essay, I foreground the manner in which a number of contemporary Mexican and Chicano artists and performers strategically employ wrestling masks to (ef)face the masks of nationalism. Masks are particularly effective props in contemporary Mexican and Chicano political performance, furthermore, because of a number of deeply rooted mask traditions in Mexican culture. I argue that by masking their identity and alluding to popular mask traditions, Chicano and Mexican performance artists make visible, and interrogate, the national face(s) of power.

One striking example of the political manipulation of masks in the Mexico of the 1990s can be seen in the struggle of the Zapatista Liberation Army (EZLN). I do not mean to reduce the Zapatista revolt to the level of performance art, but rather to underscore the primarily symbolic purpose of the anonymous black ski masks that they wear in public and in front of the press. In the words of Eduardo Galeano, "in Chiapas, the masked [Zapatistas] are unmasking power."² The practicality of the Zapatista masks stems in part from a desire to protect family and community members from military and (state-sponsored) paramilitary violence. As the rebels themselves live in the Lacandonian jungle, they do not necessarily need to hide their identity. The Zapatista's masks are at least as symbolic as practical, however, and the Zedillo government clearly engaged with this symbolism in its effort to expose Subcomandante Marcos's face. James García, in his article "Masked Avenger Still Carries a Gun," specifies the governmental strategy in de-masking Marcos: "The Mexi-

can government . . . said the man known as Marcos is Rafael Sebastian Guillen Vicente, a university professor. Government officials said Guillen was influenced by leftist guerrillas while teaching in Nicaragua, and *proclaimed that identifying the guerrilla leader had undercut his credibility*" (my emphasis).³ The PRI government's insistence on revealing Marcos's face bore witness to the extent that the mask as code of honor pervades Mexican culture. The government hoped that by unveiling Marcos's true identity with a photograph, the de-faced rebel leader would lose his power and popular appeal. Zapatista supporters uphold the collective goal of the mask-clad rebels, nevertheless, retorting in demonstrations that "somos todos Marcos" 'we are all Marcos.' Zapatistas continue to wear masks regardless of whether their identity remains unknown. While the Zapatista masks obscure personal identity, the masks at the same time function to assert a collective social, political, and ideological identity. In a sense, then, the use of masks by the Zapatistas can be seen as an element of guerrilla theater within armed struggle. The performative element of the Zapatista insurgency cannot be underestimated—it constitutes a crucial aspect of their struggle. The Zapatistas utilize the war/spectacle to call attention to the conditions facing indigenous peoples of Chiapas (and elsewhere).

It is no coincidence that a vast spectrum of contemporary Mexican and Chicano artists explicitly incorporate masks into their work. In most cases performers specifically utilize Mexican wrestling masks, highly ornamental nylon masks that cover the entire head, to situate a performance within the context of a fight or political struggle. Consider the following list, which is in no way meant to be exhaustive: Mexican musician Sergio Arau wears wrestling masks while performing with his alternative rock band "La venganza de Moctezuma." El Vez, a politicized Chicano Elvis impersonator, also wears masks to punctuate key moments in his shows with his band, "The Memphis Mariachis." The Los Angeles-based group "Los Straightjackets" always sings while wearing Mexican wrestling masks. A common prop in rock music, wrestling masks are also central to non-musical Mexican and Chicano art, especially performance art. Artist Lourdes Grobet has exten-

sively documented female *luchadoras* (wrestlers) in Mexico. Grobet photographs women wrestlers, often outside of the ring, but always in masks.⁴ A Mexican priest, Fray Tormenta, became a professional wrestler to raise money for abandoned children. Fray Tormenta wears religious vestments in the wrestling ring and a wrestling mask while performing mass.⁵ Mexican performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña wears a leopard-skin wrestling mask while performing many of his characters, including one named “El 7 Máscaras Super Héroe Fronterizo,” a character that critiques the situation on the United States–Mexico border.

At a very basic level these masks constitute double gestures—while obscuring the performers’ faces and personal identities, their masks contextualize and identify the frame of their performances. Perhaps the first example of a wrestler who became a performance icon in Mexico would be the case of El Santo. An undefeated wrestling legend, El Santo made more than 100 films, beginning in the late 1940s. “These films were simple allegories,” writes Charles Wilmoth, “where El Santo as champion of the underclass, fought against ‘otherness’ or on behalf of the sovereignty of Mexico. This genre of film continued through to the 1960s when wrestling spilled into other media: comic books, *fotonovelas* . . . posters and TV” (17). Carlos Monsivais has observed that El Santo’s mask paradoxically produced his performance character: “El Santo’s mask does not hide but rather creates his identity” (128).⁶ In contemporary performance art, as in the case of El Santo, masks do more than hide an artist’s face. Wrestling masks construct a distinctive kind of performance identity. Although the performers that I have mentioned by no means all explore the same issues, their use of wrestling masks obviously marks a common semiotic denominator. A narrative and cultural analysis brings the role of the mask into focus. If we read these performances as texts, then the wrestling masks function as immediately recognizable *signs*.

In his essay from *Mythologies*, “The World of Wrestling,” Roland Barthes interprets wrestling in terms of performance and narrative. Barthes describes professional wrestling as “a spectacle” that more closely obeys the rules of theater than sport. Each aspect

of the contest, from the wrestlers' body-types to the narrative progression of the match, constitutes a text that, like "a diacritic writing," articulates a layered accumulation of signs (18). Barthes underscores the predictable *dénouement* that characterizes each match, as well as the transparency of the individual signs:

Each sign in wrestling is . . . endowed with an absolute clarity, since one must always understand everything on the spot. As soon as the adversaries are in the ring, the public is overwhelmed with the obviousness of the roles. As in theatre, each physical type expresses to excess the part which has been assigned to the contestant. (17)

Barthes reads professional wrestling as a codified narrative that textualizes the mythological and predictable struggle of "good" versus "evil." Ultimately, observes Barthes, the good guy, or "justice," triumphs over the immoral cheating villain who inevitably suffers defeat. French professional wrestling, as Barthes describes it, obeys the conventions of popular literature. The spectators approach the match/text with the expectation of witnessing a predictable story (with only minor variations in exposition).

Although much of Barthes's analysis holds true for professional wrestling anywhere, the *lucha libre* in Mexico fuses an extraordinary (syncretic) layering of historical and cultural practices. Yareli Arizmendi identifies a number of the diverse influences that inform the tradition of wrestling in Mexico:

Mexico's wrestling world is a contained cosmology dealing with the forces of good and evil. Each mask is a modern morality play, a continuation of the Spanish auto sacramental combined with the deeply rooted mask traditions of indigenous cultures and the conventions of the contemporary comic-book hero. Also, wrestling is Mexico's most popular working-class family pastime. (108–09)

Arizmendi's description highlights a struggle of good and evil that recalls Barthes's paradigm. She also underscores the unique presence of Mexican history that combines elements of indigenous ritual, the literary and religious legacy of Spain in its colony, contemporary popular culture (comics), and class identity.

Mark Lipson also sees the *lucha libre* as an archetypal struggle of good versus evil, though he asserts that the ultimate interpretation of a match is not so unambiguous as it might first appear. According to Lipson, "every match pits *rudos*, who brazenly disrespect the rules of the game, against *técnicos*, who seek victory by stoically working within the system" (156). Although the good-guy *técnicos* always win, Lipson points out that the referees frequently disqualify the *rudos* for foul play. For Lipson, the disqualification taints the victory. Lipson conjectures that this may explain the attraction of wrestling among the disenfranchised: "The official status quo . . . is never simply what it appears to be" (157). In Mexican *lucha libre*, in other words, the spectator reads with and beneath the signs.

Lucha libre in Mexico is an enormously popular spectacle. Lipson informs us that "approximately 76 million tickets are sold each year in 187 different arenas across the country" (156). And yet the point must be made, however obvious, that most performance artists are not wrestlers. Wrestling may derive from a confluence of traditional, popular, and modern cultures, but why do wrestling masks recur with such frequency in Chicano and Mexican performance art, and what purposes do the masks fulfill in these expressions? The common presence of wrestling masks in all of these performers' work suggests that the masks function intertextually as a quoted theatrical convention. Certainly, it would be hasty if not mistaken to attempt to fix the value or meaning of wrestling masks through blanket generalizations. A brief survey and analysis of the use of wrestling masks in performance art, nevertheless, reveals a number of recurring images and concepts. Chicano and Mexican performance artists, in many cases, employ the conventions of wrestling to represent allegorically a struggle for political representation. In performances by Arau, Gómez-Peña, and El Vez, the use of wrestling masks as costume props takes place within the identifiable contextual "arena" of contemporary Mexican and U.S. politics. Often the masked wrestler/artist plays the part of society's disenfranchised, who fight to obtain power. Whereas the term "performance artist" in the United States and Europe usually

implies an intellectual who performs for an informed audience in experimental art venues, I am applying the label broadly to include musicians and political figures that integrate an exaggerated sense of theatricality into their performances. In many if not most cases, Mexican and Chicano political performance art explores the dynamics of power and at the same time attempts to empower the public. In this context, art and performance transcend the realm of aesthetics to engage in political activism. Without question, the most famous of all mask-wearing “performance activists” would be the Mexican political super hero Superbarrio, who uses the strength of his fame and popularity to halt evictions, to facilitate fair negotiation, and to lead protest demonstrations for a variety of social causes.

Purportedly, the idea of Superbarrio first occurred to a retired wrestler-turned-social activist/performance artist after hearing an evicted housewife say that only Superman could save her household from evil landlords.⁷ The irony of both her statement and Superbarrio’s persona resides in the fact that Superman has never defended the claims of the dispossessed. As Umberto Eco points out in “The Myth of Superman,” the traditional comic-book hero defends capitalist ideology, particularly the right to own private property:

He is busy by preference, not against blackmarket drugs, nor, obviously, against corrupt administrators or politicians, but against bank and mail-truck robbers. In other words, *the only visible form that evil assumes is an attempt on private property.* (123)

Superbarrio, on the other hand, struggles against corrupt administrators and politicians. Superman represents a squeaky-clean and strong “American.” He is the archetypal handsome, lean, muscular, and mysterious super hero who manifests no sign of aging. Emblazoning “SB” on his chest, the noticeably pudgy Superbarrio emerges from the slums of Mexico City as a counterforce to the myth of a super hero fighting to uphold the (hegemonic) values and correlative goods of middle and upper-class “Man.” In opposition to Superman, Superbarrio represents the needs and interests of the impoverished barrio community. His

mask derives its meaning from the contrast between his persona and that of the masked super heroes he parodies. Now a political figure to be reckoned with, Superbarrio has spoken to the Mexican legislature and to high-level political figures in Mexico and abroad. When summoned, Superbarrio appears at the scene of an illegal eviction wearing a mask, red tights, and a yellow cape to intervene (in the company of a throng of supporters and activists) on behalf of the *Asamblea de Barrios* (the Assembly of Neighborhoods of Mexico City).

Cultural critic Celeste Olalquiaga differentiates the escapist perspective of U.S. comic heroes with Superbarrio's reappropriation:

Whereas in the United States super heroes . . . do little more than promote consumer goods and reinforce the good guys versus bad guys national ideology, in Mexico City popular appropriation of the super hero has replaced leisure consumption with the need for basic goods and a schematic narrative by a street struggle for the basic rights of the poor. (87)

In opposition to the classical super hero, Superbarrio's hotline, *Barriomobile*, and *Barrio Cave* draw attention to the everyday needs of the *barrio*. Superbarrio's parody is not limited to Superman per se, but rather targets the popular tradition of U.S. super-heroes. Jim Collins points out that the Batman of traditional comics, "the guardian of Gotham City," consistently upholds the dominant myth of social justice and democracy instead of true pluralism. This is "evidenced," Collins notes, "by his membership in the 'Justice League of America'" (33). Batman does not fight for justice but rather defends the hegemonic image of social justice.

Superbarrio's mask serves a very different purpose than those of conventional super heroes. In comic books, a super hero's mask conceals identity, thus encouraging the reader to symbolically project his or her fantasy into the fiction, and, at the same time, legitimating the reader's lack of social action. "Any accountant," writes Eco, "secretly feeds the hope that one day, from the slough of his actual personality, there can spring forth a Superman that

is capable of redeeming years of mediocre existence” (108). Superbarrio’s mask, however, serves different symbolic and practical purposes. Rather than providing individuals with a fantasy of replacing reality with adventure, Superbarrio reminds us that most people have basic needs in the here and now. Whereas Superman gives the average person the opportunity to dream of distinguishing himself from the masses, Superbarrio embodies a call for collective awareness, purpose, and unity in the struggle for quotidian survival. As Olalquiaga notes, Superbarrio’s mask “allows collective identity” (87). The Superbarrio mask literally amplifies his presence, furthermore, by permitting three or four men to play the role of the political super hero. Thus, like a real comic-book hero, Superbarrio can appear in several places at once. Mauricio-José Schwarz emphasizes the manner in which Superbarrio’s lack of identity catalyzes a grass-roots political movement: “Superbarrio is not anyone . . . he is not an individual. Superbarrio stands up as a symbol within which the barrio fits. Because of his mask, not being anyone allows Superbarrio to be many” (11). Symbolizing collective power, Superbarrio’s mask performs a four-fold function of (dis)identification: Superbarrio’s mask obscures his personal identity, evokes the world of wrestling and super heroes, distinguishes him from conventional super heroes, and represents the needs and nascent power of the barrio.

Although Superbarrio’s comic-book appearance and mask might appear frivolous, his performance activism has made a significant impact on contemporary Mexican social conditions and politics. According to Schwarz, Superbarrio and the *Asamblea de Barrios* prevented more than 1,800 evictions in his first seven years of action, from 1987 to 1994 (48). Guillermo Gómez-Peña observes that the masked Superbarrio wields so much power that the PRI government felt the necessity to counter his force with their own official super hero: “The Mexican government responded to the popularity of Superbarrio by creating a performance rival: Superpueblo” (59). Notice how the very name of the official government super hero constitutes a masked nationalistic image. Superpueblo represents a superidealized Mexican

“people.” Octavio Paz’s statement applies perfectly to Superpueblo: “His face is a mask and so is his smile” (29). As a national image, Superpueblo masks the plurality of social, economic, and racial inequities that characterize conditions in Mexico.

The ideological wrestling match between Superbarrio and Superpueblo enacts a predictable struggle of “good” versus “evil” though without the semiotic transparency that Barthes attributed to French professional wrestling. Superpueblo appears good though he represents a duplicitous referent, the notoriously corrupt PRI government. Superbarrio, on the other hand, parodies the deception behind official masks. By accentuating the difference between his chubby appearance and that of a traditional super hero, Superbarrio unmasks the violence of nationalist representation. When meeting Subcomandante Marcos in Aguascalientes, Chiapas, Superbarrio presented Marcos with a wrestling mask and described it explicitly as a symbol of the barrio cause: “Marcos, on behalf of the Asamblea de Barrios de la Ciudad de México, I have the honor to present you with this mask which is our symbol, our identity, our recognition” (qtd. in Schwarz 116). Superbarrio explains that his mask and Marcos’s have parallel functions: “To hide one’s identity is to represent a collective expression. Anyone’s face could be behind the mask, neither the clothing nor the face matters. What is important are the reasons for the struggle” (qtd. in Schwarz 117).

Although performance artists utilize masks to ironically quote the aesthetic conventions of comic-book super heroes, their use of wrestling masks derives also from a specifically Mexican social text. Arizmendi explains the rule governing masks in Mexican wrestling: “In the wrestler’s code of honor, taking off your mask means . . . that you accept defeat” (109). Arizmendi analyzes a Sergio Arau song in which the performer threatens to remove his mask as a gesture of good will towards the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The offer to remove his mask bears considerable consequences, because in the tradition of Mexican wrestling, the loser can never again wear a mask. “The mask equals power,” writes Arizmendi, “to be ‘de-masked’ is to

be 'de-faced'" (117). When Arau suddenly removes his mask while performing his song "Tres Caídas" 'Three Falls,' he surprises the audience by revealing another leopard-skin mask underneath (Arizmendi 109). Arau's performance character thus retains his honor and refuses to recognize the superiority or legitimacy of his rival (NAFTA).

Lipson describes a scandal in Mexico that illustrates the seriousness of the mask's code of honor. When the estranged wife of the wrestler El Hijo del Santo released photographs of her husband's face to the press, his career was nearly destroyed. The wrestler's promoters denied that the pictures were genuine, however, and thus saved his symbolic face. Subcomandante Marcos used a similar tactic when the government circulated what they claimed was his photograph. By refusing to remove his mask, Marcos denies and undercuts the credibility of the pictures. They simply cannot be verified.

Border Arts Workshop member Emily Hicks and Tijuana video artist Berta Jottar reiterate the connection between wrestling mask and honor in their performance video "I Couldn't Reveal My Identity." In 1987, Hicks attempted to cross the United States-Mexico border dressed as a "wrestler bride." In the BAW/TAF catalogue, Hicks explains how she used the wrestler's code of honor as justification:

When I reached the agent, he asked me to remove my mask. I answered that I was a wrestler and that I could not reveal my identity. He immediately called for assistance, and a Spanish-speaking Mexican-American agent came to speak to me. He asked me to remove the mask. I repeated why I could not. He asked me which wrestlers I worked with. I said that I knew the most famous Mexican wrestlers, including Super-Muñeco, but that I was on my way to work with the GLOW (Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling) wrestlers in Los Angeles. (Hicks 62-63)

Following a body search and an examination of her purse, Hicks was eventually allowed to enter the United States without removing her mask. She later posed as the wrestler-bride in an installation/ring designed by artist Robert Sánchez. Featuring a painting of an INS officer wearing an infrared mask on the mat,

Sánchez's ring was defined by a perimeter of barbed wire. The BAW/TAF catalogue explains the gesture in terms of a masked *face-off*: "Sanchez's INS officer' [s] infrared mask is drawn on the floor of the wrestling mat in order to draw attention to the interaction between the one watching . . . and the wrestler-bride" (Hicks 62). The catalogue defines the scene of opposing masks as a border strategy for *facing* the violence of discursive images: "Border culture is a strategy . . . for facing the fear, a will to deconstruct the language of representation, stereotypes, imitation and violence" (62). Observing Mexicans and Latinos from behind infrared masks, the INS immediately defines Latinos (regardless of whether they are present legally or illegally) as Others who threaten the so-called national unity. By returning this look while wearing a wrestling mask, Hicks exposes the U.S. border policy to be an unfair process of cultural re-presentation. We could also read this match in terms of Barthes's narrative of wrestling. The contenders allegorically represent "good" (the wrestler bride) versus "bad" (the Border Patrol). In this case the evil opponent has been reduced to the level of a disarmed sign that has been flattened onto the mat. This collaborative effort between Sánchez, Jottar, Hicks, and the rest of the BAW/TAF employs the conventions and symbolic mythology of Mexican wrestling as a means to face the official and xenophobic front of U.S. nationalism.

Wrestling in Chicano and Mexican performance art, then, represents a theatrical convention as well as an allegorical arena for political struggle. When Superbarrio visited the Mexico–United States border, the Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo constructed a mock wrestling ring with barbed wire. Representing "border heroes" (Supermojado, Superviviente, Chicanosaurio, Saint Frida, and El 7 Máscaras Fronterizo), BAW/TAF performers interacted with Superbarrio until he "cut the border fence" with pliers (Gómez-Peña 28). This performance juxtaposes political "rivals" from Anglo, Mexican, and Chicano cultures. Through the use of parody, these performance artists represent the icons of popular culture, turn the public sphere into a political arena, and interrogate the surface-image of the border.

Rather than a line that separates and defines two sovereign nations, the BAW/TAF reveals the border to be a two-sided nationalist discourse that masks the cultural and ideological differences, and contiguities, between and within the United States and Mexico.

Before concluding, I borrow an image from Chilean author Alejandro Jodorowsky's pantomime routine, "El fabricante de máscaras" 'The Mask Maker,' which he wrote for Marcel Marceau. In Jodorowsky's text the mask-maker/mime places a series of masks over his face one by one: "He puts on a mask. His face becomes transformed . . . His face takes on a succession of emotions. . . . He puts on a mask of laughter: His lips open widely in the gesture of a buffoon" (82). Notice how this mask-maker's mask is entirely transparent—it is a pantomimed sign of a mask (of a mask that is itself a sign signifying laughter). The mime's mask exists only as a gesture. In this performance of reverse signification, the trace of a mask signifies the sign of a false referent. When this last mask suddenly becomes stuck, the mime's performance accentuates the contradiction between his appearance and his emotional state: "With his teeth exposed, he begs, he becomes desperate, he cries, he chokes . . . the laughter of his face continues to contradict the pain of his body" (82). Jodorowsky's pantomime performs Octavio Paz's famous metaphor *avant la lettre* and at the same time underscores the contrast between the superficial smile-face and a body in pain: "His face is a mask and so is his smile" (29). I would like to suggest this image of contradiction as both an allegory for the state of present-day politics and a strategy for performative critique. Hugo Hiriart defines Mexican political discourse, that "laborious monument to the art of eluding and zig zagging," as Mexico's "most grotesque mask" (93). While politicians project masked images of national unity, the experiences of those stuck behind the mask, workers, minorities, and subordinated Others, bear much in common with Jodorowsky's desperate, choking, and begging *fabricante*.⁸

Though Jodorowsky's mime uses a facial gesture to represent a mask, the performance artists I discuss in this essay employ actual wrestling masks to call attention to the fictional discursive

gesture of national unity. This was blatantly underscored in another BAW/TAF performance called "Border Tug-of-War" (1990). The performers wore masks that were constructed of U.S. and Mexico flags, while tugging on both ends of a rope that stretched across the border.⁹ Though an analysis of this performance exceeds the scope of this essay, one should note the manner in which their specially designed masks call into question the superficial correlation between nation, flag, and identity. Mexican and Chicano performance artists simultaneously embody and contest the contradiction between appearance and real conditions.¹⁰ Conspicuously masked, performance artists thus attempt to challenge the false image of an idealized and unified nation by calling attention to the fiction and violence of a transparent national mask.

The performance artists that I discuss in this essay all rearticulate wrestling and its code of honor in order to face diverse, though related, issues. Superbarrio and Fray Tormenta "wrestle" to improve the day-to-day conditions of Mexican society's dispossessed. Sergio Arau stages a musical wrestling match in his parody of the "good neighbor" rhetoric of NAFTA. The collaborative performers of the BAW/TAF defend the disenfranchised on the United States–Mexico border while at the same time theoretically interrogating the discourse of "Border Control" and the essentializing misrepresentations with which dominant culture contains subaltern Others.¹¹ In one way or another all of these performances evoke various aspects of the syncretic mask tradition in Mexico. They employ masks, at times overtly and at times implicitly, as symbols for indigenous cosmology and history, as a pre-scripted code of honor from the ring of the *lucha libre* 'wrestling,' and as a parodic gesture that effaces the unblemished look of comic-book super heroes. Masks de-emphasize the role of the individual and place the character within a context of symbolic struggle. "Like the protagonist of a ritual," writes Lipson, "the man wearing the mask is merely the latest incarnation of a larger struggle" (112). It is perhaps the open-ended potential of the mask as signifier that renders it an effectual prop for performance artists interested in articulating political critique. Barthes

would read the mask as a sign “endowed with absolute clarity” (17), a semiotic prop that contributes toward the representation of popular stereotypes. A Derridean interpretation of this same sign, however, suggests that within each sign lies a series of masks. The mask does not mean any one “thing,” but rather calls attention to the fact that multiple layers of conflictual political and contextual discourses lie beneath the surface. If the mask is a sign, it will leave *trace* impressions of other images with which it perpetually “wrestles” intertextually. Stuart Hall uses the metaphor of a mask to describe the discursive practice of nationalism (under capitalism): “The first general ideological effect . . . is to mask, conceal or repress these antagonistic foundations of the system” (337). In the construction of a nation, Hall explains, classes (and we might add ethnicities and people of different genders and sexual preferences) are fragmented into groups of individuals and then subsequently re-presented in imaginary unifying discourses that mask economic contradictions and conflict, thus producing hegemonic consent in the name of the “community” and the “nation” (336–37). Through the complex “language” of *lucha libre*, Chicano and Mexican performance artists (ef)face the popular images of nationalism on both sides of the border. From Batman to the Border Control, they confront hyperidealized mythologies of national unity as rivals. In the tradition of Bakhtin’s rouges, clowns, and fools, these masked avengers/wrestlers/performance artists attempt to unmask the nationalist discourses projected by social and national authority.

The concept of “the nation” certainly masks difference, yet it is crucial to examine the presuppositions that lie behind the mask metaphor. If the purpose of a mask is to conceal one’s face and identity, does the presence of a mask imply the hidden presence of a *true identity*? Perhaps Superbarrio and the Zapatistas convey this type of message. “We are all behind the mask,” claims Superbarrio (qtd. in Schwarz 78). Beneath the mask lies a real presence—exploited and undernourished people (indigenous as well as mestizos)—whose needs and interests remain hidden, unrepresented beneath the surface of the Mexican nation-state. By covering their faces these activists and rebels protect them-

selves from reprisal and symbolically affirm the power of an unknown and unknowable presence.

And yet it is no simple task to tear off the mask of nationalism. To speak of a national mask would imply the hidden existence of a true national face, an authentic *pueblo*, crying out to be discovered. In spite of the partial validity of the metaphor—the fact that impoverished, disenfranchised, and marginalized peoples *are* deprived of true representation—this image of a national mask renders a complex process superficial. Beneath the official face/mask of a nation lies no real face, but rather innumerable masks. As Borges writes, “the mask lies underneath the face” (413), the face itself is a cover, a mask that conceals more masks below. This infinite and therefore unrepresentable pluralism forms the conundrum of multicultural agency. How is it possible to resist (hegemonic) nationalism without paradoxically asserting a face of equally inaccurate minority nationalism? How can subaltern writers and artists reject the masks of ethnicity, nationality, gender, or class without substituting essentializing myths of identity? Contemporary Mexican and Chicano performance artists attempt to redress this issue through a parodic denial of their own identity. Masked anonymity allows Mexican and Chicano performance artists to conjugate collective (non)identities that face, and performatively efface, the masks of nationalism.

Notes

1. This is not to say that hegemony universally covers up opposing views. The dominant image of U.S. democracy, for example, leaves space for a limited amount of political opposition in order to perpetuate an illusion of democratic pluralism. Stuart Hall points out that Gramsci’s concept of hegemony includes the containment of opposing views: “‘Hegemony’ achieves the establishment of a certain *equilibrium* in the class struggle so that, whatever are the concessions the ruling ‘bloc’ is required to make to win consent and legitimacy, its fundamental basis will not be overturned” (334).

2. My translation. This quote, from Galeano's "Mensaje enviado al Segundo Diálogo de la Sociedad Civil," was printed in the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* on June 7, 1995. The text is available online: <http://spin.com.mx/~hvelarde/Uruguay/eduardo.galeano/chiapas/el.desafio.htm>.

3. See James García, "Masked Avenger Still Carries a Gun."

4. For a brief analysis of Grobet's photographs of *luchadoras* see Coco Fusco's essay "Essential Differences: Photographs of Mexican Women."

5. Guillermo Gómez-Peña mentions Fray Tormenta in *Warrior for Gringostroika* (58).

6. This and all translations are my own.

7. For a description of the evolution of Superbarrio, interspersed with interviews and first-hand testimonial, see *Todos somos Superbarrio* by Mauricio-José Schwarz.

8. Jodorowsky's *fabricante* eventually rids himself of the mask but at the same time blinds himself by tearing out his eyes. I should clarify that Jodorowsky's point in "El fabricante de máscaras" is probably more metaphysical than political. As a mystic, Jodorowsky would sustain that all of our faces are masks. Rather than blinding ourselves in search of a true face, Jodorowsky suggests that we should accept the entire set of masks of which we are composed.

9. My description of the "Tug-of-War" is based on personal communication with BAW/TAF member and participant Berta Jottar. See also the document and photograph in the 1991 BAW/TAF catalogue.

10. In the case of BAW/TAF, Anglo artists also wear masks. Anglo use of *luchador* masks in this context is clearly an outgrowth of the Mexican and Chicano traditions.

11. Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Emily Hicks officially resigned from the Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo in 1989 claiming that "Border Art" had been commodified by the "Multi-Culture Industry." A new Border Arts Workshop was formed in 1990. For a critique of Border Art, see Gómez-Peña's article "Death on the Border: A Eulogy to Border Art." For a brief history of the BAW/TAF, see Gómez-Peña's "A Bi-National Performance Pilgrimage" in *Warrior for Gringostroika*.

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