Staged Ethnicity and Touristic Consumption in Postcolonial Latin America: The Case of *Cholita Wrestling*

Elizabeth Bieri

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Washington

2012

Committee:

Valerie Manusov

José Antonio Lucero

Nancy Rivenburgh

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Department of Communication

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank all of the people that I met while traveling in Bolivia that made this thesis possible. I am grateful for the many conversations I had with tourists, local Bolivians and tour guides that influenced my research and shaped how I approached this topic. Even though I did not personally meet any of the fighting *cholitas* I am grateful that I was able to briefly enter their world and learn a little bit about their daily reality.

My graduate studies would not be possible without the constant support from my family. They have always encouraged me to carry on and do my best. I would especially like to thank my sister, Kate, who traveled to Bolivia with me this summer and used her vacation time to act as my companion and, to her dismay, my research assistant. Her thoughtful analysis contributed to my study and allowed me to think about things that I would have otherwise overlooked.

This project has exceeded my expectations mainly due to the guidance and mentorship of my thesis committee. Crispin Thurlow, the chair of my committee, has been incredibly supportive of my academic work and has pushed me to challenge myself beyond what I thought was possible. I am also greatly indebted to the members of my committee, Tony Lucero and Nancy Rivenburgh. Tony played an influential role in this project and has served as a source of constant support throughout the process. He introduced me to the topic and gave me the courage to actually travel to Bolivia and conduct research first-hand. Nancy provided me with the invaluable advice and structure needed to get this project off the ground. Her input, especially early in the research design phase, provided a solid framework to

build my study around. I owe a big thank you to Valerie Manusov, who has stepped-in and saved the day on numerous occasions throughout my graduate program. She has been incredibly kind throughout my time at UW and I am very thankful for her support. Thanks also to Kate Bell, Kristine Mroczek and Lisa Coutu for all the times you have been there to listen to and discuss my problems or concerns.

Chapter 1: Introduction

> **"El Alto is home to the rough- and-ready, athletic and extremely choreographed 'free-style' *lucha libre*. Less of a sport and more an entertainment for audience voyeurs. More recently, much to the delight of the crowds, women have joined the fray, some dressed as innocent looking *cholitas*, others in devilish costumes. Anything goes, from eye gouging to head-locks and, occasionally, dwarf-throwing -not for the politically correct or sensitive viewer" (Lonely Planet Bolivia, 2010, p. 73)**



Figures 1.1 and 1.2: *Cholita* wrestling match in El Alto (Photos by Getty Images)

Every Sunday, hundreds of tourists and local Bolivians pour into a run-down stadium in El Alto to watch *cholitas* wrestle, not only with each other, but also with the male wrestlers, the referee, and even sometimes the crowd. Tourists and locals of El Alto look on in delight and shock as these indigenous women wrestlers slap, hit, and crush each other while wearing traditional indigenous dress comprised of

large layered skirts, called the *pollera*, bowler hats, petticoats, and embroidered shawls.

Cholita wrestling started in 2001 and has since become a cultural phenomenon and must-see attraction for tourists visiting La Paz. Although *Cholita* wrestling has recently gained some notoriety by being featured in *National Geographic Magazine, The New York Times* and on the popular television show *The Amazing Race,* it is relatively unknown outside of Bolivia. *Cholita* wrestling was derived and inspired by *lucha libre,* the style of professional wrestling that originated in Mexico in the early 1900s. It is characterized by elaborate costumes and masks, story lines, and characters that evolve over time, crowd interaction, and a general atmosphere of bedlam. The Bolivian version of *lucha libre,* differs in one key aspect: The main attraction is female indigenous wrestlers or *cholitas.* The *Cholitas* are primarily women of Aymara descent who live in El Alto.

In 2001, Juan Mamani, a resident of El Alto and *lucha libre* enthusiast, started selling tickets to *cholita* wrestling in his gymnasium in El Alto. During an interview with *The New York Times* (2005), Mamani explained how the concept of *cholita* wrestling was born: "I wanted to get people's attention and fill up the coliseum. At first, I thought of fighting dwarves. I even brought one in from Peru. Then I thought of the *cholitas*. It's been popular ever since." After Mamani's initial success, he formed the wrestling group *Titanes del Ring* (Titans of the Ring) and started hosting wrestling shows every Sunday afternoon in his gym. The members of his group *Titanes del Ring,* are the wrestlers that perform each week. The members consist

mostly of the *cholitas* but there are also the male wrestlers and "dwarves" who serve as opening acts and sideshows for the main attraction, the *cholitas.*

Although it is impossible to know the true intentions of Juan Mamani, it can be surmised, based on his comments, that his main motivations in developing *cholita* wrestling are profit and fame. During an interview with *National Geographic Magazine* (2008), Mamani was unwilling to discuss many aspects of his business, but he was adamant about one detail: "What I want to make absolutely clear is that it was me who came up with the idea of the *cholitas*." Mamani does not want anyone to take credit for his idea and is clearly protective over what he believes to be his creation.

As a business owner, Mamani appears to be equally as dominating. In the same *National Geographic Magazine (2008)* article, the *cholitas*, when interviewed, seemed to be terrified of Mamani. One woman told the reporter, "Don't tell him [Mamani] you called me; don't tell him you have my phone number." Overall, a common theme throughout the news coverage about *cholita* wrestling suggests that Juan Mamani is a domineering business owner who showcases the *cholitas* indigenous identities as a way to make money. Although Mamani is himself of indigenous ancestry, he does not seem to be concerned that *cholita* wrestling may be attractive to tourists because it is promoted as exotic. In fact, as evidenced by his comment above, Mamani seems to realize this and welcomes it as long as it fills up his "coliseum" every Sunday.

As *cholita* wrestling became a tourist phenomenon and a large money-maker for Mamani, an unexpected dynamic began to emerge during the shows: Some

cholitas started to use their platform as wrestlers as a way to promote messages of female empowerment to the indigenous women of El Alto. According to some, *cholita* wrestling became a site for feminist struggle and social change in a Bolivian society where *machismo* culture is not only accepted but largely promoted. In a 2008 interview in *The Guardian*, Lourdes Montero, an indigenous women's rights activist, explains, "There is still a lot of prejudice, violence and physical control over women. It will take time. But *cholitas* know they need to fight for their rights. There's a resurgence of pride in the skirt."

The phrase "pride in the skirt" is significant because Montero is referring to the *pollera* as a symbol of female indigenous identity. In her 2008 article in the *National Geographic Magazine,* Alma Guillermoprieto says, "Indeed three rows of ringside seats are filled with foreigners, all pop-eyed, but they're actually irrelevant. It's their fellow Bolivians the *cholitas* are performing for."

Most of the newspaper and magazine articles about *cholita* wrestling focus on the positive message of female empowerment; claiming that the *cholitas'* victories in the wrestling ring symbolize the success of the feminist struggle for gender equality. Although some may argue that conditions for women are slowly improving, I do not agree with Guillermoprieto (2008) and the other articles that paint *cholita* wrestling as a positive and progressive movement for social change. Instead, my research indicates that *cholita* wrestling is a practice that promotes misogyny, exploits alterity, and reproduces colonial power dynamics. I arrived at this conclusion by focusing my research around the primary questions: What are the cultural politics of *cholita* wrestling? How do the cultural politics of cholita

wrestling speak to post-colonial power dynamics in terms of (outside) narratives created for tourists and (inside) narratives of transformative social change articulated by the wrestlers?

To answer my research questions, I focused on the various ways in which *cholita* wrestling is represented and understood in various media formats and at the show in El Alto, Bolivia. But, before discussing my data and findings, it is important to place the study in the proper theoretical context. The next section provides pertinent socioeconomic and political background information about El Alto, the location of *cholita* wrestling.

Research Site: El Alto

> **"The city of El Alto fans out from the area known as the *Ceja* (the eyebrow) to the north, the west, and the south, flowing around the airport. Maps of the city often describe it as a *mancha urbana,* or "urban stain," and it does appear to have spread as if it were spilled liquid. The streets and buildings stretch out over the high plateau between the East and West Andes. Only the mountains themselves can, it seems, stop the city's progress" (Lazar, 2008, p. 26).**



Figure 1.3: Street in El Alto



Figure 1.4: Parade in El Alto (photos by author)

On January 21, 2006, Evo Morales gave a pre-inaugural address at Tiwanaku, an important pre-Incan archaeological site on the outskirts of La Paz, in front of thousands of supporters. In his speech, Morales, the first self-identified indigenous president, promised to end the "colonial and neoliberal model" that has ruled Bolivia since the arrival of the Spanish in 1532. The momentous election of Evo

Morales was, in large part, possible because of the actions of the residents of El Alto, a city of nearly one million people perched on the high plains above La Paz.

Known as the first indigenous city in Latin America, El Alto only became recognized formally as an independent city in 1988, before which it was considered part of La Paz. Over the past 30 years, El Alto has experienced a rapid population growth from approximately 300,000 inhabitants in 1988 to nearly one million people today. Most of the population is comprised of indigenous Bolivians who migrated from the countryside as economic conditions there continued to deteriorate. The conditions in El Alto were often not much better than what they left behind in the countryside, however. "In 2001, 53 percent of households lacked running water, 80 percent lacked sewage, the rate of illiteracy was 10 percent, and the average income per family was $2 per day" (Hylton & Thomson, 2007, p. 107). The limited regular waged work resulted in El Alto relying on the informal economy for employment opportunities, which consist primarily of street markets, food vendors, artisanal shops and taxi services.

El Alto became the center of Bolivian politics in September and October of 2003 in what later came to be known as the Gas War. Much like the Cochabamba Water Wars of 2000, the Gas War revolved around the privatization of Bolivian natural resources. The privatization of resources stemmed from neoliberal economic policies that sell the rights of Bolivian natural resources to foreign-based multinational companies who export the gas for large profits (Hylton & Thomson, 2007). These policies, promoted by the International Monetary Fund and World

Bank, benefited the wealthiest Bolivians while making the resources such as gas and water increasingly expensive for the average Bolivian.

An example of the effects of this policy occurred in June 1997 when the World Bank told then President Sanchez de Lozada that if Cochabamba's water supply were privatized, the government would receive $600 million of debt relief. Consequently, the government leased the rights to the water supply to a single Italian company until 2039 and received the $600 million payment from the World Bank. But, in 2000, the Italian company raised the rates for water, making water unaffordable for many people dramatically. "Water constituted a quarter ($15) of household budgets for people earning minimum wage ($60 per month), and in some cases rose as much as 100 percent" (Hylton & Thomson, 2007 p. 103). This particular example sparked a massive indigenous-led riot that ultimately resulted in the government agreeing to lower water prices.

The debate surrounding privatization policies is about the control of natural resources, but it also signifies a larger historical and ideological conversation about the oppression of indigenous Bolivians. For many Bolivians, the struggle over resources is just another example of the effects of colonialism that began with the Spanish in the 1500's and then, after independence in 1825, manifested itself through foreign-influenced political and economic policies. These policies favored the wealthy elite and further disenfranchised indigenous Bolivians who comprised the majority of the population (Hylton & Thomson, 2007). The Cochabamba Water Wars and ensuing controversy surrounding the privatization of resources brought to the surface the feelings of frustration and anger that many Bolivians have

towards the government. It was in this context and climate that riots about natural gas resources turned into an indigenous-led Bolivian revolution.

The Gas War was the spark that ignited widespread political protest that ultimately forced President Sanchez de Lozada to resign from office and flee La Paz for Miami in the early morning hours of October 17, 2003. The Gas War was the result of many complex factors, but the heart of the issue revolved around the disapproval of the government plan to export natural gas via Chile. When talks between the various parties broke down, the residents of El Alto quickly organized a widespread protest and blockaded the streets "in defense of gas" (Hylton & Thomson, 2007, p. 111). The riots grew larger each day and became increasingly organized. The city of La Paz effectively shut-down because the protestors blocked all routes into the city and cut off the delivery of outside resources. President Sanchez de Lozada responded with a brutal military crackdown that ultimately killed approximately 60 people; mostly residents of El Alto. Instead of quelling the demonstrators, the violent response by the government intensified the situation. as protestors called for the resignation of Sanchez de Lozada.

The movement, which started in El Alto, quickly started to gain support among some people from La Paz. On October 13, a march in the center of La Paz drew 100,000 people, but just three days later the number of protesters swelled to over 600,000 people. The next day Sanchez de Lozada fled Bolivia and left the country in the hands of his vice-president Carlos Mesa, a career intellectual who had no previous political experience. Although Mesa was the President until his

resignation in 2005, the Gas War in 2003 marked the beginning of revolutionary change that culminated in the election of Evo Morales in 2005.

El Alto played a significant role in the Gas War and the indigenous-led political movement that elected Evo Morales two years later. Over the past ten years El Alto transformed from the home of the oppressed and voiceless to the center of Bolivian indigenous political power. Increasingly visible on the world stage, El Alto is a fascinating site of study because it combines issues of class, ethnicity, colonialism, political power and revolution. It is with this history and context in mind that I examine *cholita* wrestling.

Theoretical Framework

Various literatures and theoretical traditions have framed my research on *cholita* wrestling. As such, my research is interdisciplinary and is informed by three major fields of scholarly activity: tourism studies, cultural politics, and postcolonial studies. Each of these fields has its own extensive literature, but, for the purposes of this paper, I will provide only a very brief description of the fields and focus on those concepts or issues that pertain most directly to my study.

Critical Tourism Studies

The academic study of tourism is one of the fastest growing research areas in fields such as anthropology, communication, geography, and sociology. Tourism is the world's single largest trade and, according to Ed Bruner (2005), "it is one of the greatest population movements of all time" (p.10). Arguably, the most relevant tourism research is the work that situates tourism within the larger frame of

globalization (e.g., Bruner, 2001; Favero, 2007; Lisle, 2004; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010; Urry, 1990, 2001).

The tourism industry is based on the successful production of difference and the ability to market "difference" as something that can be seen, touched, and consumed. In the past, tourism has been viewed by the academy as a superficial exercise in one-way consumption and a practice that lacks complex interaction worthy of study. Urry (1990) problematizes this perception when he discusses the idea of the "tourist gaze" and the role of tourism as, "a game, or rather a whole series of games with multiple texts and no single authentic experience" (p. 100). Urry articulates the idea that tourists are not just a single homogenous group and their perceptions of events are individualized based on their personal history and identity.

Furthermore, Urry's notion of "tourism reflexivity" placed the academic discourse of tourism studies within the larger framework of globalization and issues of political economy. The term "tourism reflexivity" is the process that "enables each place to monitor, modify and maximize their location within the turbulent global order" (Urry, 2002, p. 142). Locations around the world examine and market their "unique" or "exotic" qualities in an attempt to draw tourism and therefore enter the globalized economy on a scale that would otherwise not be available to many nations. Examples of this process are, *Favela* tours in Rio De Janerio, and tours of former Nazi concentration camps. Tourism is no longer considered a superficial act; instead, it is considered to be an integral component of the global

economy. And, as Lisle (2004) argues, "tourists are inherently transnational subjects" (p. 6).

However, the question arises: How does tourism function within the global economy and perpetuate a discourse about the Other? Favero (2007) explains that the tourism industry falls within a larger network he refers to as, "culture industries of otherness," which are, "global industries that capitalize upon the elaboration, representation and display of cultures, places and the world" (p. 52). Favero argues that "culture industries of otherness" are not just byproducts of globalization; rather, he believes that they are a "constitutive part" of the global economy.

The tourist industry is a small part of a larger structure that is invested in perpetuating stereotypical images of places and people as a mechanism to generate revenue and maintain the global discourse surrounding the "other". Thurlow and Jaworski (2010) use the term "banal globalization" as way to further understand how the discourses surrounding tourism and globalization are both connected and maintained. Thurlow and Jaworski (2010) explain:

> We choose to invoke the banal ourselves for framing and understanding tourism discourse as rooted in everyday, textual enactments of globalization, be they institutional, interpersonal or mediatized. By 'everyday', we do not mean to say that these enactments are either foolish or inconsequential: on the contrary. It is, we suggest, at the level of 'innocent' texts and 'harmless' (inter)actions that globalization- or, more precisely, global capitalism- is actually realized (pp. 225-226)

Thurlow and Jaworski suggest that it is not only on a foreign vacation that people enact global citizenship; rather it is often the perfunctory actions of daily life that underlies a global identity.

In order to be successful, the "culture industries of otherness" need to carefully shield tourists from backstage power dynamics and local politics. Favero (2007) addresses this issue: "the culture industries of otherness sell delicate issues through a form (i.e. the touristic one where visual pleasure and enjoyment take centre-stage) that hides from view all the power and political dimensions and practices that permit the production of these events" (p. 77). Thurlow and Jaworski (2010) assert that the "culture industries of otherness" and the "touristic ways of seeing" create an environment where tourist locations and host cultures are recreated to not include any hint historical or contemporary injustices. It is through this lens that tourists view and consume host cultures and locations as places without postcolonial tensions, poverty and political instability. As Thurlow and Jaworski (2010) state, "Only in such a way can the world appear to us as a beautiful sight" (p. 235).

In addition for the desire to see the world as a "beautiful sight," tourists also want to believe that what they are experiencing is a "real" or "authentic" experience. McCannell (1978, 1990) believes that tourists undertake travel in a quest to discover authenticity and in doing so are presented with acts of "staged authenticity" and "staged ethnicity." "Staged authenticity," a term coined by McCannell (1976), indicates that tourists are often presented with fake and staged representations of culture and are shielded and kept away from the "real" or

"authentic" culture that is happening behind the scenes. As Bruner (2001) points out, however, McCannell's (1976) theory is predicated on the assumption that a true or authentic culture exists and can be singled out, identified, and performed for tourist consumption.

Numerous scholars problematize McCannell's theory and instead view culture as something that is lived and performed and is in a constant state of change. Culture is not a static group of characteristics that can be separated from a person's identity and performed in an objective manner (Brunner, 2001; Wade, 2010). As Favero suggests, however, the tourist industry markets "culture" as something tangible that can be seen and consumed for touristic pleasure. Neither Favero nor McCannell (1976) account for tourist agency sufficiently.

To this end, Bruner (2001) provides an excellent case study and analysis of the actual tourist experience as a part of the "culture industries of otherness." He analyzes three different types of "staged authenticity" and "staged ethnicity" in the tourism industry in Africa. Bruner's study is especially relevant to my work on *cholita* wrestling because it places the politics of tourism and, more specifically, "staged ethnicity" within the context of tourist agency and the global political economy. A brief overview is provided below.

Bruner details three separate examples of "ethnic tourism" in Kenya. First, Bruner examines a case of "staged authenticity" at Mayers Ranch where tourists watch Maasai perform traditional dances and chanting rituals. At the Mayers Ranch the tourists do not interact with the Massai dancers and, according to Bruner, are supposed to view the performance as an accurate historical representation of pre-

colonial African culture. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on only one of his examples, an "Out of Africa" themed party held at the Sundowner hotel near the Serengeti national park in Kenya. This party was being held for a group of tourists on a safari vacation. Tourists arrived at the expensive hotel after a multi-day safari in Tanzania and were entertained with a cocktail party and a dinner buffet on the manicured lawn of the Sundowner hotel. During the party, Maasai men perform a dance and encourage the tourists to dance with them. After the dance, the Massai and the other hotel employees sing a song that has been called, "the tourist national anthem" by a travel agent in Nairobi. The song "Jambo Bwana" features the phrase "Hakuna Matata," which means "no worries, no problems" and is familiar to most Westerners because of its use in the film *The Lion King* (1994). The employees and Massai also sing "Kum Ba Yah" with a "Jamaican reggae rhythm" (Bruner, 2001, pp. 893).

Bruner concludes that the scene at the Sundowner hotel is interesting because, "American popular culture as expressions of 'Africaness' and 'blackness' have been represented to American tourists, by Africans, in Africa" (2001, p. 893). In this instance, the presentation of globalized images of the Maasai and "Africaness" is successful because it is precisely the tourists' perceptions of Africa that are being displayed for them through theater and performance on the lawn of the Sundowner hotel. McCannell (1976) might view this scenario as an example of "staged authenticity" in which the tourists attend the event in an attempt to discover "authentic" Maasai culture.

Bruner (2001), however, rejects this analysis on numerous levels but, most importantly, he denies the assumption that tourists are just passive consumers who lack personal agency and will accept anything that is presented in front of them. Rather, the Sundowner scene is, "globalization gone wild," and the tourists recognize this to some degree. Bruner concludes that the Sundowner represents neither American nor African culture, rather it is a hybrid tourist space created by global images and perceptions that are constantly "flowing across borders" (p. 893).

Bruner's work is helpful because it positions tourism within the frame of globalization and complicates the notion that tourism is a superficial act of consumption. Thurlow and Jaworski (2010) state, "Globalization, for us, is therefore a discourse, an ideological formation or cultural narrative that reveals and conceals the more tangible workings or global capitalism, all of which runs central to the global cultural industry that is tourism" (p. 5). This definition of globalization frames my thinking about tourism and encourages me to think about *cholita* wrestling as more than just a tourist phenomenon. To properly understand *cholita* wrestling, I must examine it as part of a larger discourse about colonialism, power relations, and identity.

Cultural Politics

"Cultural politics" is an umbrella term for a large area of academic research (Alvarez et. al.); many different definitions exist. Scholars interested in cultural politics hail from a wide array of academic departments, such as political science, anthropology, economics, cultural studies, geography and communication. But, for the purposes of this paper, cultural politics can be thought of as an academic

discourse that is interested in the nexus of culture and politics and assumes that culture is inherently political and politics are inherently cultural. In their book, *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race and the Post-modern World* (1995), Jordan and Weedon provide a helpful theoretical frame of reference for this paper and define the study of cultural politics as:

> The legitimation of social relations of inequality, and the struggle to transform them, are central concerns of cultural politics. Cultural politics fundamentally determine the meanings of social practices and, moreover, which groups and individuals have the power to define these meanings. Cultural politics are also concerned with the subjectivity and identity, since culture plays a central role in constituting out sense of ourselves…The forms of subjectivity that we inhabit play a crucial part in determining whether we accept or contest existing power relations. Moreover, for marginalized and oppressed groups, the construction of new and resistant identities is a key dimension of a wider political struggle to transform society (as cited in Alvarez et al., 1996, pp. 5-6).

Scholars of cultural politics reject the notion that culture is a static set of beliefs, customs or texts and instead propose that culture, "involves a collective and incessant process of producing meanings that shapes social experience and configure social relations" (Alvarez et al., 1996, p. 3). In this framework, culture is inherently political because meaning is created, intentionally or not, to either reinforce or contest the dominant ideology (Alvarez et al., 1996, p. 7). For people without a voice, culture acts as an avenue of political expression. Sommer (2006)

asserts that, “culture enables agency” in circumstances where traditional forms of protest are not possible. Social movements are an especially rich area of study for scholars interested in cultural politics because oppressed groups use culture as a mechanism to assert citizenship and contest the status quo.

Over the past decade, social movements in Latin America have intensified and, in some cases, spurred revolutionary change. According to Alvarez et al., (1996) social movements in Latin America do not take a specific form, but many of the political movements contest the concept of “citizenship” that was promoted during neoliberal political and economic reform in the 1970s and 1980s (pp. 2). Under the neoliberal economic and political model, citizenship is considered a personal attribute in which people are responsible for pulling themselves “up by their own private bootstraps” (Alvarez et al., pp.1). This notion of citizenship is unacceptable to many people because it privileges wealthy citizens and allows them to have a voice in the political arena while it marginalizes the less fortunate. According to Alvarez et al. (1996), social movements in Latin America revolve around the fight for greater equality in the political arena. Social movements use cultural politics as a way to contest the dominant political ideology. Alvarez et al., (1998) further explain this concept, “when movements deploy alternative conceptions of woman, nature, race, economy, democracy, or citizenship that unsettle dominant cultural meanings, they enact cultural politics” (p. 7). Social movements enact cultural politics as a means to unsettle the dominant political culture or ideology. This does not necessarily mean that the goal of the social movement is to gain inclusion to the dominant political culture; rather, it is to alter it.

Feminist movements in Latin America utilize cultural politics as a way to advance their cause of gender equality. Feminist struggles in Latin America often face an extra barrier, however, because the "intellectual and militant left" movements often do not consider gender equality an issue of concern. Alvarez et al., (1998) examine this issue:

> The dominant political culture and that of much of the intellectual and militant left were permeated by sexism, early feminists also came to understand women's oppression as profoundly cultural, crosscutting all public and private discourses and spaces- including those of male-dominant opposition, where women and "their issues" too often were consigned to the sidelines of would-be structural-institution transformations. (p. 296)

As a result of widespread sexism, feminists in Latin America find themselves involved and invested in two separate social movements: The struggle for class equality and the fight for women's rights. The relationship between the two groups is often complex, because the "traditional" leftist groups view the issue of women's rights as inferior to their own movement for class equality, leaving the feminists stuck in the middle and under pressure to privilege one social movement over the other. Maria Teresa Blandon, a Nicaraguan activist, explains how some feminists approach this issue: "The feminist movement appeared questioning out-of-date or decrepit ways of doing politics…and was born with a very radical perspective of criticizing the Left" (Alvarez et al., 1996, p. 296). Although risky, feminists set out to define themselves as separate from the leftist struggle by criticizing "the Left" for

dismissing issues such as domestic violence, sexual violence and reproductive health.

Latin American feminists think about the two social movements as, "'the general' and the 'specific,' the 'political' and the 'cultural'" (Alvarez et al., 1996, p. 296). Their job is to merge these two categories by altering the cultural ideology surrounding issues of women's rights. Feminists do this by enacting cultural politics; they raise awareness about these issues by teaching classes about gender relations, domestic abuse and income inequality. Latin American feminists use culture as a way to unsettle the dominant political structure that promotes sexism.

Cultural politics is a term for a large area of interdisciplinary study. For the purposes of this thesis, I choose to extrapolate the idea that culture is an avenue for marginalized or oppressed groups to contest the dominant political ideology.

Postcolonial Studies

To analyze the politics of representation in Latin America effectively, an understanding of the role of colonialism and its lasting effects on the cultural and political landscape is necessary. In the simplest terms, postcolonial studies are an academic discourse that is concerned with the historical and contemporary implications of colonialism. The lasting effects of colonialism are present throughout Latin American culture, politics and economic systems, but they are particularly pervasive in the Andean regions of South America. Andean scholar, Anibal Quijano, contends that colonialism in the Americas was the starting point for what is today called "globalization." Quijano (2000) states:

> What is termed globalization is the culmination of a process that began with the constitution of America and colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism as a new global power. One of the fundamental axes of this model of power is the social classification of the world's population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism. (p. 533)

Although colonialism in Latin America largely ended in the 1800s, the power structure created by colonialism is still in place. The current global hegemonic power structure is based on this colonial notion of race and difference. Quijano (2000) believes that this "coloniality of power" created a lasting hierarchy based on race that relegated indigenous citizens to the social cateogroy of serfdom. Not only did colonialism in the Americas create a racial hierarchy, but it created a new way of thinking about identity. According to Quijano (2000), "Terms such as *Spanish* and *Portugeus,* and much later *European*, which until then indicated only geographic origin or country of origin, acquired from then on a racial connotation in reference to the new identities" (p. 534). In this way, colonialism not only labeled the colonized as racially inferior, but also gave Europe a mechanism to think about itself as superior. Quijano's (2000) concept of the "coloniality of power" connects to Said's work on the "other."

Edward Said (1978) posited that, in creating a stereotypical representation of the East or "Orient," Europe created a discourse, "by which European culture was able to manage- and even produce- the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily,

ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment" (pp.6-7). Said referred to this discourse of representation as *Orientalism*. Through Orientalism, European society was able to define itself by creating a dichotomy of "us" versus the "orient" or, more accurately, "us" versus all the "others". This separation, although based on nothing more than stereotypical images, allowed Europe to maintain its sense of cultural superiority and hegemonic influence over the rest of the world and promote the discourse of *orientalism* not only to Europeans but to the people of the "orient" as well. According to Said, the European discourse of difference and the "orient" justified colonialism and the physical and cultural domination of the "other".

In her work, hooks (1999) discusses the power dynamics surrounding the comodification and consumption of the Other. hooks rejects the idea that white male sexual desire of the Other indicates progress in racial power relations:

> To make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality. When race and ethnicity become commodified resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground were members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other. (p. 23)

By engaging in sexual encounters with the Other, people of the dominant race and gender are engaging in "imperialist nostalgia" which is an act that recreates the historical power structures of inequity. hooks refers to such encounters as "eating

the Other" which is a process by which traditional hegemonic roles are asserted by exercising the power and privilege to choose to consume difference, or the Other.

The works of Said and hooks are important because they provide a theoretical framework to try and understand the politics of representation in current Latin American society. With these works in mind, I will now provide a short overview of work by Canessa (2007) because it is directly relevant to the postcolonial, historical, and cultural context of my research.

In his work, Canessa (2007) examines beauty pageants as a way to understand how sexual identity, race, and gender are imagined and consumed in contemporary Bolivia. Canessa wants to see if the change that arrived with the election of Evo Morales also changed the way Bolivians perceive race and sexual desire. Like in many Latin American countries, beauty pageants are very popular in Bolivia, and the winner often becomes a household name around the country. Canessa (2007) notes that, although the majority of Bolivians are of indigenous descent, the results of the beauty pageant are always the same, "Miss Bolivia is invariably white" (p. 6). This is not particularly shocking considering that around the globe the idealized version of sexual beauty and desire is often that of a white woman's body, but what is surprising to outside viewers is the costumes that the white Bolivian beauty contestants choose to wear during the pageant. The women often express their Bolivian national pride by wearing "national dress" or clothing that is traditionally worn by indigenous women. To an outsider this seems confusing or even silly, but Canessa (2007) explains the complex negotiation of identity and sexual desire that is taking places during the pageant, "Miss Bolivia here resolves

the paradox in a fantasy: the Body of a white woman with the accessibility of an Indian woman" (p. 7).

The beauty pageant scenario illustrates that the colonial power structure surrounding sexual desire and identity are still very much in place in current Bolivia. Canessa (2007) notes that Indian women "have long been conceived as the European internal other" (p. 3). As such, the Indian woman was not viewed as beautiful or overtly sexual, but was appealing because of her availability and ability to be dominated by white males with little or no consequences. Therefore, Indian women were considered sexually appealing because of their position in society while white women were viewed as having the erotic or appealing body.

This theoretical framework provided a brief overview of the most pertinent literature to my study. The academic disciplines of critical tourism studies, cultural politics and postcolonial studies are each large and nuanced; but, for the purposes of this thesis, I am only extrapolating specific concepts and themes from each academic area and applying them to my research on *cholita* wrestling.

The main concept taken from the literature on critical tourism studies is the idea that tourism is not a simple one-way encounter; it is a complex negotiation of representation, consumption, and identity. To properly examine issues surrounding tourism, must be situated within the context of globalization and identify discourses surrounding history, power dynamics, and representation. The literature on cultural politics reveals a way to think about how culture can give marginalized or oppressed groups a way to contest the dominant political ideology, which would otherwise be impossible. The research on postcolonial studies focuses on the

concept that even though the physical forms of colonialism ended in Bolivia in 1825, its effects are still widely felt. Colonial power dynamics created the conditions that allow the western world to label the "other" as inherently different and inferior. Western desire to have contact with the "other" does not necessarily signify equality, but, instead can reproduce imbalanced colonial dynamics. The topic of *cholita* wrestling does not fit squarely into any one particular discipline and these main points provided the theoretical framework for this study.

Research Design

Although marketed as an opportunity for tourists to be shocked and entertained on a Sunday afternoon, *cholita* wrestling is far more than just a simple tourist attraction or case of staged authenticity; it is a complex site that combines issues of tourism, ethnicity and exploitation. *Cholita* wrestling is a phenomenon that warrants academic study because it reveals consequential issues surrounding power and identity in postcolonial Latin America.

Research Questions and Research Methods

I organized my research around the following questions: What are the cultural politics of *cholita* wrestling? How do the cultural politics of cholita wrestling speak to post-colonial power dynamics in terms of (outside) narratives created for tourists and (inside) narratives of transformative social change articulated by the wrestlers? To answer my research questions, I focused on the various ways in which *cholita* wrestling is represented and understood in various media formats and at the show in La Paz, Bolivia.

To determine how *cholita* wrestling is represented, it was first necessary to discover the different types of audience members who, through various formats, consume *cholita* wrestling. In addition, I had to learn how these different audiences perceive and understand the event. It is with this knowledge in mind that I was able to decipher and differentiate the multiple representations of *cholita* wrestling that exist. I collected these data in two ways: First, I surveyed, categorized and analyzed the available online video content of *cholita* wrestling, and, second, I went to La Paz and attended several *cholita* wrestling events.

Textual Analysis and Media Critique

The first part of my study revolves around the different representations of *cholita* wrestling in various video formats that are available on the internet. The reason that I set the parameters focusing on video content that is available online is because it is the most likely avenue that people who are not tourists visiting La Paz, would learn about *cholita* wrestling. Therefore, their perceptions of the event is going to be based on the representations of *cholita* wrestling that they see online. Second, I chose to focus solely on video content, instead of also including pictures, blog posts, newspaper, and magazine articles, because it is the most interactive form of media and, in the case of *cholita* wrestling, video of the event is more likely to leave a lasting impression on the viewer.

At the beginning of this research, I quickly learned that YouTube was the best data collection source available, and it is most likely the first place people would search if they were looking for video about *cholita* wrestling. I, therefore, narrowed down my search criteria for videos that could be initially accessed on YouTube. At

this point, I viewed, organized, and categorized the different types of videos involving *cholita* wrestling that are available on YouTube.

When I typed the phrase, "*cholita* wrestling" into YouTube, the search yielded 231 video results. Whereas the number of results vary if I change the search criteria to phrases such as, *"Lucha Libre* Bolivia" or "indigenous female wrestlers" the type of video content remains largely the same. After watching each video, I organized the clips into the following three categories: first-hand recordings of the event that were uploaded directly to YouTube by a tourist visiting the event; news stories and coverage about *cholita* wrestling; and video clips of television shows where *cholita* wrestling has been featured. The majority of video content on YouTube consists of short clips filmed by tourists. A much smaller amount of the content is from news stories and an even smaller portion of the video is from clips from television shows.

After viewing each clip and creating these three categories, I chose one clip from each category to analyze on deeper level to understand how the video producer presents *cholita* wrestling and how this representation might influence the viewer. Although it is difficult and somewhat problematic to choose three video clips out of 231, I believe that each of the videos that I selected are representative of most of the clips of this nature on YouTube.

To ensure that I analyzed each clip systematically, I created a list of focus questions to help guide my analysis. The list is as follows:

- Who is the video producer? Is it a single person? A news agency?
- Who is the intended audience?
- How long is the video?

- When was the video filmed?
- Does it seem like the video was edited before it was released?
- How is *cholita* wrestling involved in the video? Is it the main attraction? Or is it shown in passing? What is the role of *cholita* wrestling in the video?
- What message is the video producer trying to convey?
- How do you think that a viewer would perceive this video?
- Based on my first-hand experience, is the video producer leaving anything out? What are the possible reasons for this omission?
- Why is the video significant? What does it communicate about representation and the purpose of *cholita* wrestling?
- Has my perception of the video changed since I went and witnessed *cholita* wrestling first-hand?

Using these questions as a guide, I watched each video many times over the period of eight months and took extensive notes. From my notes, I then organized the data around apparent themes or patterns in the different videos. With this research completed, I traveled to La Paz, Bolivia to learn how attending the event in-person differed from the available online content.

Ethnography and Participant Observation

In July 2011, I conducted a brief ethnography of *cholita* wrestling in La Paz, Bolivia. While in Bolivia, I attempted to learn as much as possible about the different discourses surrounding tourism, indigenineity and power that were present at the wrestling match. To do this I utilized participant observation as my primary research method. I followed the ethnographic research model put forth by Geertz

(1983) in which he rejects the notion that ethnographers can ever be completely objective and passive consumers of information and asserts that ethnographers must be actively engaged in the work with a constant awareness of the researchers role in the field. With this framework in mind, I compiled a list of things that I wanted to observe and questions that I wanted to ask. The list is as follows:

- The time, date and location of the event
- The Number of wrestlers, the number of wrestling acts per show
- The ratio of men and women in each wrestling act and how they interact
- How the wrestlers interact with the crowd?
- Do the wrestlers interact with certain people in the crowd? Who?
- How many people are in the audience? (Approximately)
- How many people appear to be foreign tourists?
- How many people appear to be locals?
- What are the different "types" of tourists? What are the different demographics? (Gender, age, race, nationality)
- How do the tourists interact with each other? With the wrestlers?
- What is the tourist response to the event? Do they differ? How so? What seems to be the response of the majority?
- How do local Bolivians respond to the event? How does this response differ or correspond to the tourist response(s)?
- Do tourists and locals "cheer" and "boo" at the same things?
- Is the local crowd mostly comprised of men, women, and children?

At the wrestling event I used the previous questions as a general guide for observation and writing my field notes.

For this study I observed three sample groups for data collection. My primary sample population was the tourists who attend *cholita* wrestling events, but I also observed the people who ran the wrestling events as well as the local Bolivians who

attended the matches. I only observed the people associated with the wrestling event and the local Bolivians in attendance. I did not have an opportunity to have contact with people other than fellow tourists. As I did not be interview them, it was not possible for me to understand what the wrestlers and local Bolivians would say or feel about the event or the tourists who come to see them every week. However, it was possible for me to observe their behavior with the tourists and infer how they wish to be represented.

I collected data for this study over the course of three weeks in La Paz, Bolivia in July 2011, from July 6, 2011 to July 25, 2011. During this time I attended the *cholita* wrestling event three times (7/10, 7/17, 7/24). The matches are only held on Sundays. However, the event begins at 4pm and usually ends around 8pm. That gave me four hours of field observation each week and twelve hours in total for the study.

I attended the *cholita* wrestling event both independently and with Andean Secrets, a tour group that organizes trips for tourists to go to the wrestling event. I attended the event independently one time and with the agency, Andean Secrets, twice. When I went independently, the ticket price was approximately 100 Bolivianos (approximately 15 USD). But, when I went to the event through Andean Secrets, the package cost around 175 Bolivianos (approximately 25 USD) and included roundtrip transportation, pick-up and drop-off at a La Paz hotel, a short tour of El Alto, vouchers for snacks, and admission to the event.

In terms of actual data collection, I used a camera, video recorder, tape recorder and a field journal. I took photos of the event for research and recollection

purposes only. I did not photograph or ask any fellow tourist to identify him or herself by name. While observing the wrestling event itself, I took pictures, recorded video and took notes in a field journal.

Organization of the Thesis

The remainder of this thesis is organized into three sections. The first section provides three case studies of *cholita* wrestling video content that is available online in an attempt to illustrate and understand how different video formats can portray *cholita* wrestling in vastly dissimilar ways. The second section presents my ethnographic fieldwork and findings that I completed during a trip to Bolivia in July 2011. The concluding section ties my study back to the initial research questions and suggests areas for further research.

Chapter 2: Mediatized Frame

When I first started researching the topic of *cholita* wrestling, I turned to the internet and quickly discovered that YouTube was an invaluable source of information. As there are very few print materials available on the topic, video content uploaded on YouTube served as my introduction to *cholita* wrestling and became my primary channel for information. After many hours of watching YouTube footage of *cholita* wrestling, I started to recognize patterns in the types of video content and how these various videos differ in the manner in which they present *cholita* wrestling. This chapter will look at three different types of video formats of *cholita* wrestling and examine the significance of the different representations.

The YouTube clips can be thought of as cultural texts; texts that offer insight into the culture of the *cholita* wrestling event itself as well as the cultural politics of representation surrounding *cholita* wrestling. Furthermore, the video content not only provides images of the *cholita* wrestling event. It communicates information about how the video producer views, consumes and perceives the event.

In the following section I will provide a brief description of a video clip from three different video formats: a YouTube clip uploaded by a tourist, a BBC news clip and a video clip from a television show. After a brief description of each clip, I will analyze the differences and similarities between these categories to understand the different ways *cholita* wrestling is represented and how the varying representations are significant. I will then discuss how the clips reveal a colonial discourse and ask if

the videos portray *cholita* wrestling as a site of transformative change or a site that reinforces inequity.

YouTube Clip from a Tourist

Title: Bolivia
Source: Uploaded onto YouTube by GlobalKeVv on August 14, 2010
Length: 2:08



Figure 2.1: Bolivian wrestler kissing a male tourist (video captured by GlobalKeVv)

This short video clip of a *cholita* wrestling match was captured by a male Australian tourist. The video was shot from the first row of seats behind the wrestling ring and begins with footage of a *cholita* and a male wrestler fighting outside the ring, directly in front of the man filming the video. The *cholita* pins the male *luchador* down and rips off his pants. At this point, the video producer laughs and yells, "nice undies mate." As the *luchador* runs away, pantless, the camera follows the *cholita* as she chases the *luchador* in front of the barrier that separates the spectators from the wrestling ring. After a couple seconds the *cholita* throws the

male wrestler over the barricade and into the first row of seats occupied by shocked tourists. The *luchador* lands on a young white male who appeared to be in his early 20's. Inexplicably, the *luchador* then kisses the male tourist that he landed on and the crowd starts to cheer and laugh wildly. The *cholita* pours a bottle of water on the *luchador* in an attempt to end the kiss and resume the fight. At this point, the *cholita* and *luchador* return to the ring and continue wrestling, but the camera stays on the tourist who was just kissed by the *luchador.* The video captures the tourist wiping his mouth with his sweatshirt in an exaggerated fashion. Then, the video producer says, "He [tourist] can't get over it….look at him." Then, the video producer narrates what he thinks the tourist is thinking by saying in an excited tone, "I was kissed by a man…. a Bolivian man."

After this brief period of crowd interaction, the wrestlers return to the ring where two male wrestlers are fighting against one *cholita.* At this point, the Australian tourist stops laughing and narrating the video and just films as the wrestling match continues in the ring. The Bolivian members of the crowd become very loud and active while the tourists appear to quiet down as they watch the dramatic and, at times, clumsy wrestling moves. For the next minute or so, the film captures the two *luchadores* physically overpower the *cholita* until, at the very last moment, the *cholita* inexplicably escapes and wins the match by pinning down the two male wrestlers. As the *cholita* is being awarded the winner the crowd applauds wildly and the video producer screams, "yaaay….wooohoooo."

The purpose of the YouTube clip uploaded by GlobalKeVv is to share his travel experiences with others, whether they are his friends from home or people on

the internet that he will never meet. I first viewed this particular video about a year ago in March 2010 and chose it for analysis because it is largely representative of the other videos of its kind available on YouTube. But when I recently went on YouTube to view the clip again, I was redirected to GlobalKeVv's personal YouTube channel where he has uploaded 20 videos detailing his travel experiences. It was on his YouTube channel that I was able to confirm my suspicions about GlobalKeVv; he is a 27 year old Australian male who has traveled to numerous countries in Latin America. His YouTube channel contains footage of his time spent in Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Mexico, Brazil and Cuba. To date, the videos on GlobalKeVv's YouTube channel have been viewed 77,556 times. I mention all of this because it helps to confirm my belief that the *cholita* wrestling clip communicates more about GlobalKeVv than it does about the event of *cholita* wrestling.

By uploading the *cholita* wrestling video to YouTube, GlobalKeVv is using the footage of *cholita* wrestling as a kind of exotic prop that helps him craft a narrative about himself. This narrative revolves around the idea of expertise gained through unpredictable adventure and third-world travel. The type of clip that GlobalKeVv recorded and uploaded is representative of this narrative as well; he chose to film a scene where the wrestlers were interacting with tourists in surprising ways. Instead of focusing on the actual wrestling match, GlobalKeVv chose to upload a clip featuring a male wrestler kissing an unsuspecting male tourist and uploaded it to illustrate his experience at a *cholita* wrestling match.

The video uploaded by GlobalKeVv is not an outlier; it is just one of several hundred examples of how a certain type of tourist visiting *cholita* wrestling

perceives, consumes and presents *cholita* wrestling to the outside world. Although the tourist and host dynamic is complicated, I argue that the way in which tourists, like GlobalKeVv, chose to represent *cholita* wrestling reveals more about their identity than that of the local Bolivians associated with *cholita* wrestling.

BBC News Coverage of *Cholita* Wrestling

Title: "Women Wrestling Sweeps Bolivia"
Video details: Reported by Andres Schipani. Video was uploaded online May 31, 2008.
Duration: 3:04



Figure 2.2: *Cholitas* talking before a fight



Figure 2.3: A *Cholita* talking to local children (video captured by the BBC)

This video clip begins with footage of two *cholitas* wrestling each other in front of a packed crowd in El Alto and Andres Schipani, the BBC reporter, standing ring side, looking into the camera and introducing the BBC viewers to *cholita* wrestling by saying:

> Indigenous women called *cholitas* are gaining power in today's Bolivia in the most unlikely way. Some are achieving notoriety in political life but others

> have turned to the less likely arena of wrestling and have become sensations in a sport that has captured the imagination of the Andean country.

The video then cuts to images of the *cholitas* practicing their wrestling moves and performances in a run-down outdoor practice facility in El Alto. While watching the women practice Schipani explains that the female wrestlers, lead by Carmen Rosa, are starting their own wrestling group as way to, "seek vengeance and victory in the ring."

Schipani asks about Carmen Rosa's motivation to be a wrestler and Rosa responds, "Because we *cholitas* have been humiliated and very discriminated against in the past. That is what mostly drove me to be a fighter. I also wanted to show people, not only in Bolivia, but around the world that women can do what men do and still be an indigenous woman." The video then turns to images of the *cholitas* in their homes and walking through the streets of El Alto. As these images are displayed, Schipani explains that the *cholitas* follow the same regimen as the male wrestlers in addition to maintaining their homes and working in the local markets. He explains that *cholita* wrestling is becoming increasingly popular in Bolivia because the *cholitas are* proud of "their traditional costumes" and continue, "swinging their pigtails." Schipani concludes the video by saying that *cholitas* are using the wrestling ring to show Bolivia, "what they are made of" and that the events are so popular because they provide an opportunity for Bolivians to forget the harsh reality of their lives and enjoy a show that revolves around a, "good versus evil struggle".

The short BBC news clip was produced and edited to be an informative introduction to a new social phenomenon in Bolivia. The clip portrays *cholita* wrestling as a social movement for female empowerment in Bolivian society. The tagline that is presented under the video on the BBC website reveals the intentions of the report by saying, "A new craze is sweeping Bolivia where *cholitas* are entering the wrestling ring to fight for their identity and pride." The BBC is trying to directly connect the recent indigenous-powered political and social revolution to the motivations of the *cholitas* and their decision to wrestle. Schipiani implies that a feminist movement is consuming Bolivia and, that while some indigenous women promote change as government workers other women embody progress by showcasing and asserting their indigenous identity in the wrestling ring. Although, female empowerment is a theme present at a *cholita* wrestling show it is only one of the many important factors at play.

First and most importantly, the BBC video neglects to mention the origins of *cholita* wrestling and the fact that it began as a money making venture by Juan Mamani. Schipiani introduces *cholita* wrestling as a homegrown activity that Carmen Rosa started as a way to promote local female empowerment in El Alto; whereas, in reality, Rosa broke away from Mamani and *Titanes del Ring* because she felt that she was being exploited. Additionally, the video jumps between images of *cholitas* wrestling in a packed stadium to images of Rosa and a few other *cholitas* rehearsing their wrestling moves in a run-down practice facility. What Schipiani does not tell the viewer is that the video from the packed stadium is from the weekly *Titanes del Ring* show owned by Mamani and that Carmen Rosa is no longer

associated with that event. This editorial decision is important because it falsely implies to the viewer that Rosa's small group of wrestlers is wildly successful and filling stadiums in El Alto whereas, in reality, the commercial success of *cholita* wrestling and Rosa's motivation for indigenous female empowerment are both completely separate organizations and vastly unequal in the attention that they receive.

The BBC video also fails to mention that the primary revenue source for *cholita* wrestling is money from tourism, not ticket sales to local Bolivians like Schipiani leads the viewer to believe. The video shows footage from a *Titanes del Ring* wrestling match but tourists are never visible on camera or mentioned as the target audience for the event. This is a deliberate omission by the BBC editorial staff because introducing tourism as the main motivation for *cholita* wrestling would complicate the feel-good message of widespread female empowerment and atmosphere for social change. The complicated relationship between female indigenous identity, touristic consumption and the possibly exploitative nature of tourist practices would have to be touched-upon in the video which would muddle the boundaries of the BBC's clean and positive message about *cholita* wrestling. Although I do not consider the BBC video to be inaccurate because the feminist struggle is a theme throughout *cholita* wrestling, I consider the video to be misleading in its attempt to introduce the average BBC viewer to the reality of *cholita* wrestling. I do not think that the video is misleading because of ignorance by the BBC staff; rather I think that the BBC made deliberate decisions about how they

wanted to represent *cholita* wrestling to its primarily European and North American audience members.

<u>*Cholita* Wrestling on Television</u>

Clip One: *The Amazing Race*. Season 13, Episode 3. (CBS)
Length: 43:44

Clip Two: *The Amazing Race* 13- Phil's Video Diary: La Paz
Length: 4:25



Figure 2.4: Barry, a cameraman for *The Amazing Race*, wrestles a *cholita* (video captured by *The Amazing Race, CBS)*

The Amazing Race is a reality television series where contestants compete in challenges as they race around the world in a quest to win one million dollars in prize money. During a challenge on season 13, the contestants went to El Alto and participated in a *cholita* wrestling match in order to advance to the next portion of the race. One contestant from each group had to practice six wrestling moves with a *cholita*; then they had to successfully perform the wrestling moves against the

cholita in front of a packed crowd in the *Titanes del Ring* gymnasium in El Alto. Some contestants completed the challenge on the first try while others had to perform for the crowd two or three times before they were able to move on to the next stage of the race.

As the challenge began, the contestants ran into the gym and, with the *cholitas* lined up in front of them, picked the *cholita* that they wanted to work with for the day. One female contestant said to her partner, "you have to pick one" as they both stood in front of the group of *cholitas*. After the other group member quickly replied, "I pick her" the contestant and the *cholita* ran to the practice ring without any verbal exchange at all. As the contestants learned how to do the numerous wrestling moves, it was a male referee that communicated directions to a translator for the contestants. Furthermore, at the end of the successful challenge the *cholita* presented each group with the package that contained their next clue but did not speak to the contestants as they ran off to the next leg of the race.

Another surprising aspect of the video was the lack of shock or surprise among the contestants when they walked into the gymnasium and learned that they would be wrestling women in traditional indigenous dress. One male contestant said, "It's going to be a first for me…fighting against a woman." But that was the extent of the comments regarding the wrestlers gender; nobody discussed the fact that the women were indigenous nor did anyone mention the outfits worn by the *cholitas*. Additionally, the costumes of the contestants are significant because, regardless of gender, they were assigned a traditional *Lucha Libre* costume; a

costume worn by the Bolivian male wrestlers consisting of brightly colored spandex, a belt, a mask and a cape.

The second clip from *The Amazing Race* is a behind-the-scenes clip entitled, "Amazing Race 13- Phil's Video Diary: La Paz". In this video the host of the show, Phil Keoghan, scouts locations for the upcoming season. In this four minute segment, Phil travels to the *Titanes del Ring* gymnasium to show the viewers a preview of one of the challenges in the next season of *The Amazing Race.* As Phil enters the gymnasium in El Alto all of the wrestlers are seated together in bleachers and waiting for his arrival. The male wrestlers are wearing their *lucha libre* costumes and all of them have masks covering their faces, while the *cholitas* are wearing traditional indigenous dress. After talking to the wrestlers for a couple minutes Phil gets into the ring and starts to wrestle with a *cholita.* However, right before the start of the match, Phil looks at the camera and, referencing the *cholita,* says, "Look at the beautiful eyes of this lady over here…. she's a fighter." Then the wrestling begins and Phil is quickly knocked down. As he is lying on the ground Phil says to the camera, "that's a lot of skirt right there."

After Phil finishes wrestling, Barry, the sound producer, is convinced by Phil to try and wrestle a *cholita.* After a couple seconds of comically running around the ring Barry attempts and fails to flip the *cholita* onto the ground. While Barry is holding onto the *cholita's* legs he looks at the camera with a smile and says, "It's like a tree trunk." Quickly thereafter Barry is knocked to the ground and looses the fight. The video ends with an out-of-breath Phil saying that the *cholita* challenge in Bolivia is going to be a tough and entertaining episode.

The Amazing Race footage is unlike the two previous video clips because the producers of the *The Amazing Race* are not concerned with introducing the intended audience to the practice of *cholita* wrestling. Instead, *cholita* wrestling serves as an exotic backdrop to the main purpose of the episode, which is to watch increasing drama unfold as the contestants race through various challenges in an attempt to avoid elimination. These two clips were heavily edited and scripted, which bring up many questions about the underlying motivations in the deliberate decision to represent *cholitas* in this manner. *The Amazing Race* producers edited the footage to make the *cholitas* appear to be voiceless and deferential; women to consumed with the eye but not heard or understood.

After viewing the first clip numerous times, it became apparent to me that the most significant theme running throughout the video is the concept of silence. Both the contestants and the *cholitas* were silent at times where I would expect there to be lots of communication or comments of shock or confusion. During the challenge itself the contestants had to exclusively interact with their chosen *cholita* and learn various wrestling moves. In order to learn these moves and techniques, there must have been some form of communication between the contestant and the *cholita,* even if it was only pointing and speaking in Spanish. But the footage shows no form of verbal or nonverbal communication, nothing at all. This is surprising because, based on my research and personal observation, the *cholitas* are both loud and outspoken while they adopt their wrestling personas. Throughout *The Amazing Race* clip the *cholitas* acted in a deferential manner towards the contestants and each other, which is a stark contrast to my experience at a *cholita* wrestling match.

The second clip from *The Amazing Race* is designed to give audience members a sneak-peek of the upcoming episode and get them excited about the next adventure. When Phil visits the *Titanes del Ring* stadium in El Alto, he portrays *cholita* wrestling as a quirky yet popular activity in the community. However, Phil's comments about the *cholita* wrestlers are worth some discussion. In reference to the woman he is about to wrestle, Phil says, "Look at the beautiful eyes of this lady over here…. She's a fighter." In this statement, Phil is openly combining qualities of physical strength and sexual attractiveness but is not outwardly discussing how the woman's indigenous identity creates that connection. Furthermore, when Phil loses the fight and says, "that's a lot of skirt, right there" he is directly referencing the perception that, in contrast to white women, female indigenous bodies are very strong and physical. As seen in figure 2.4, Barry, the sound producer, echoes this statement when he, in reference to the body of a *cholita*, says, "it's like a tree trunk."

Analysis

The three previous clips all revolve around the topic of *cholita* wrestling yet each clip leaves the viewer with a different impression of the event. Obviously the videos were produced for different purposes and intended for different audiences, but the dissimilar products reveal a bit about the politics of consumption and representation surrounding indigenous identity in postcolonial Latin America.

The purpose of the short YouTube clip uploaded by GlobalKeVv can be further understood with the help of Urry's concept of the tourist gaze. Urry (1990) contends that people engage in tourism to escape their ordinary lives and partake in the extraordinary and exotic experiences that they can only day-dream about at

home and the 'tourist gaze' is the way tourists consume what they see on vacation. "The tourist gaze is directed to features of the landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday experience. Such aspects are viewed because they are taken to be in some sense out of the ordinary" (Urry, 1990, p. 3). According to Urry, the tourist gaze is the subjective lens through which tourists see and think about things that they encounter while on vacation. Therefore, it could be argued that what the tourist chooses to gaze upon says more about their own personal identity and preferences than it does about the objects or people that are actually being gazed upon. I previously stated that the YouTube clip reveals more about GlobalKeVv than it does about the *cholita* wrestling event and Urry's concept of the tourist gaze allows GlobalKeVv's footage to be examined on a closer level. The style of the video itself allows the viewers of the clip to watch *cholita* wrestling in the same way that GlobalKeVv is experiencing the event; the viewers see what GlobalKeVv sees and are able to simultaneously hear his thoughts about what he is watching through his narration of the events. This is significant because what GlobalKeVv chooses to gaze upon, record and then later upload to YouTube reveals his own personal motivations for going to see *cholita* wrestling. By recording and uploading this clip to YouTube GlobalKeVv is using this particular scene to categorize his experience at a *cholita* wrestling event, which is noteworthy because the clip does not include much footage of actual wrestling. Instead the clip features a tourist who suddenly finds himself in an unexpected and shocking encounter with an indigenous male Bolivian wrestler. GlobalKeVv uploaded this particular video because he wants to show people that he is not a dull or predictable traveler;

instead he is an exciting person who experiences extraordinary things in exotic locations. In this YouTube clip, GlobalKeVv uses *cholita* wrestling and the contrast between himself and the wrestlers who are positioned as the "exotic other" to help define his desired identity more than to document or understand the event itself.

In contrast to the un-edited YouTube clip, the BBC video provides an example of how representations of *cholita* wrestling can be purposely produced and edited to portray the event in a specific way that does not necessarily resemble the reality on the ground in EL Alto. The BBC intentionally portrayed and edited the video so that the viewers would think that *cholita* wrestling is a quirky yet positive manifestation of a broader female empowerment movement that is sweeping across a post-revolutionary Bolivia. This strong editorial voice is not inherently deceiving, but what is troubling is that the video is framed as an objective introduction to the phenomenon of *cholita* wrestling to the average BBC viewer. This inevitably leads to the questions: Why would the BBC actively try to portray *cholita* wrestling in this light? To adequately answer this question the issues surrounding the politics of representation have to be examined.

If the BBC addressed the concerns of exploitation and indigenous identity that surround *cholita* wrestling the video's positive and somewhat uncomplicated message of feel-good female empowerment would be challenged. In this case, the BBC's editorial decisions bring to the surface the politics of visibility and invisibility in the media. Favero (2007) discusses this dynamic:

> The technologies of representation, as a constitutive part of social relations and as a matter of ideology, give us, through their 'enframing', certain

> opportunities to see and understand while they leave other sides of the world unseen. What is made invisible is therefore not the result of randomness but rather the specific political and ideological context in which these particular technologies of representation are used (p. 72).

Favero contends that the technologies, such as the video camera, naturally give the viewer the opportunity to see what is presented to them, but it is the producer who injects the decisions about what is captured and what is left invisible. The producers, in this case the BBC, are part of the process of the "culture industries of otherness" in which there is a vested interest in creating a product that can be easily consumed by the maximum amount of people. The BBC completely excluded issues of backstage politics, leaving the viewer unaware of the significant controversy surrounding this El Alto phenomenon. In the case of *cholita* wrestling and the BBC, "what we see, is not all there is to know about it" (Favero, 2007, p. 77).

The Amazing Race clip differs from the YouTube and BBC footage because it makes no attempt to show the audience how a typical *cholita* wrestling event unfolds. Aside from a few brief images of *cholitas* practicing wrestling moves in the ring, the episode does not explain what usually happens in a *cholita* wrestling match. By removing the *cholitas* from their normal habitat and not providing the audience with any background context *The Amazing Race* producers strip the *cholitas* out of their chosen wrestling identity and develop a new identity based on the needs of the show. This is problematic because *The Amazing Race* producers are denying the *cholitas* any form of personal agency or voice; instead the women are positioned as exotic props to be looked at, and in some instances, sexually desired.

One of the first scenes of the episode depicts a white male contestant standing in front of a line of smiling *cholitas* as he struggles to decide which *cholita* he is going to pick for the challenge. Although it was a short scene and may have been the most efficient way for the producers to visually introduce the audience to the next challenge I would argue that the image also employs a message about power dynamics. The viewer at home sees a group of indigenous women lined up in front of a white male who has the power to arbitrarily choose a woman based on her appearance. Canessa (2007) might argue that this scene recreates a colonial power structure in which desire is not based on physical beauty or attractiveness but, "that the eroticization of the Indian woman is rooted in her sexual availability, of sexual access without responsibility" (p. 7). In this particular scene and throughout the entire episode the *cholitas* are readily available but at no point are they given a voice; the *cholitas'* purpose is based entirely on the needs of the American contestants.

In contrast to the scene above, there are numerous examples throughout the episode in which the appealing physical attributes of the *cholitas* are openly discussed. As I mentioned earlier, the most prominent example occurs during the second clip when Phil, the host, is about to get in the wrestling ring and fight a *cholita* but first says, "Look at the beautiful eyes of this lady over here…. She's a fighter." As Phil makes this comment he is overtly staring at the woman's body in a way that suggests that he is sexually attracted to her. It could be argued that such an expression of male sexual desire towards an indigenous woman based on physical attraction is a positive step in the direction of progress and fighting against

traditional power structures of dominance of the Other. But, hooks (1999) rejects that notion,

> To make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality. When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other (p. 23).

hooks believes that asserting sexual desire for the Other does not equate to the acceptance of "cultural plurality" but instead enacts an "imperialist nostalgia" in which white men find different ways to fulfill the desire for contact with the Other that used to be achieved through colonization and physical domination of the female body. In the case of Phil, hooks might argue that his expression of sexual desire towards the *cholita* does not have the same meaning as it would if he said the same thing about a white woman; instead Phil thinks of this woman as, "a resource for pleasure." The second part of Phil's comment is also significant because it uncovers a connection between sexual desire and perceived ethnic or racial primitivism. In the first part of the comment Phil is admitting his attraction to the *cholita* but in the second part, "she's a fighter" he is suggesting that part of the *cholita's* appeal or attractiveness is because of her physical power associated with her indigenous identity that gives her the ability to be a strong and fierce wrestler. By saying, "she's a fighter" directly after talking about her aesthetic appeal, Phil is subtly insinuating

that she is a woman who is likely to 'put up a good fight' against a man whether it be in the bedroom or in the wrestling ring.

The Amazing Race chose to represent the *cholita* wrestlers in this way because the producers are primarily, if not entirely, interested in attracting as many viewers as possible to the show. The purpose of the episode is not to accurately present the event of *cholita* wrestling. As a result, the *cholitas* are used as props to market and sell the idea of difference as a way to attract viewers who expect to see something new and exotic each week.

All three video clips convey different messages, but they all promote the narrative that *cholita* wrestling is a site where discourses of inequity are performed and promoted. The BBC's decision to present *cholita* wrestling in an entirely positive light reveals the power dynamics inherent in representation. According to the BBC, *cholita* wrestling is an enactment of cultural politics, an activity that Bolivian feminists invented as a "new way of doing politics" (Alvarez et al, 1996, p. 296). But, the BBC has the power to hide the ugly side of *cholita* wrestling; the side that uncovers the exploitative nature of the event. If the BBC explored the tourism aspect of the event, the BBC would have to confront the issue that European and North American tourists provide the revenue to keep *cholita* wrestling going. The fact that the BBC has the power to hide or emphasize certain aspects of the event reveals the inequity inherent in *cholita* wrestling. Those with the power shape how the event is perceived while the *cholitas* themselves have little voice in deciding how they are represented.

Like the BBC video, the other two clips portray *cholita* wrestling as a site of inequity, but they differ in the way they do so. The YouTube clip and *The Amazing Race* footage present *cholita* wrestling as practice that mirrors colonial power dynamics of inequity. In his YouTube clip, GlobalKeVv places the entire event into the category of the exotic "other." He is not interested in the wrestling or even the *cholitas;* instead, he wants to show the audience, through his footage, that he has been to Bolivia and experienced the exotic and unexpected. The screen name GlobalKeVv reveals a bit about his motivation for traveling and the way he chooses to represent the places he has been. The name GlobalKeVv implies to the visitors of his YouTube channel that he travels the world, collecting real experiences as well as the symbolic capital associated with far-flung adventure. By positioning himself as "global" he is conversely placing the people at the host locations as stationary, unsophisticated and primitive. Not unlike the role of the colonizer, GlobalKeVv explores the world and documents his travels not in an attempt to experience cultural plurality, but to cement his identity as a modern and global citizen.

In contrast to the unedited clip produced by GlobalKeVv, the *Amazing Race* video intentionally positions the *cholitas* as voiceless exotic commodities. The *cholitas*' bodies are on display for visual consumption without the necessary explanation to provide more information about their identities. Their ethnicity is commodified and taken out of context for display; stripping the women of any personal agency. The video clips produced by the *Amazing Race* promote a colonial power construct in which the body of an indigenous woman is a site for sexual desire and dominance.

Chapter 3: Ethnographic Frame



Figure 3.1: Market outside the wrestling arena



Figure 3.2: View of La Paz from El Alto (photos taken by author)

Introduction

In July 2011, I traveled to La Paz, Bolivia for three weeks to conduct research on *cholita wrestling*. I attended the *cholita wrestling* event, which is only held on Sunday, three separate times. The first time I went to the event in EL Alto I was accompanied by a private guide who was not associated with *cholita wrestling*. On the second and third trip I went to the event with an organized tour group provided by the agency, Andean Secrets.

For the purpose of continuity I will organize this chapter around two themes that I observed at all three events rather than talk about each individual trip to the wrestling match. I will group my observations and analysis into the following two sections: The audience at the wrestling match; and how the event is framed to attract tourism. But before jumping into my specific observations and analysis, I will

set the scene by briefly describing my first trip to see *cholita* wrestling and my initial response to the atmosphere and organization of the wrestling match itself.

Setting the Scene

The *Titanes del Ring* stadium sits in front of a market at the entry way to the city of El Alto and it seemed to me, on the Sunday's that I visited, that every resident of El Alto was out shopping at the local market (as seen in figure 3.1). On my first visit, I quickly realized that the ticket line for *cholita* wrestling was wrapping around market vendors in a manner of controlled chaos and, as I saw other tourists succumb to the vendor's pressure and purchase food and souvenirs, I suddenly did not know if the line was running through a local market or; instead, the market was setup around the tourist line. This confusion and congested atmosphere marked my trips to see *cholita* wrestling and the chaos only intensified after I entered the building and witnessed the show first-hand.

The event was scheduled to begin at 4pm; the ticket line did not start moving until well after that and I did not reach my seat until 4:30pm. After purchasing my tourist ticket for 15 USD, I entered the stadium and quickly realized that security was separating the tourists and local Bolivians into two lines. Tourists were seated in the three rows of plastic chairs set up directly around the ring while the Bolivians were relegated to the bleachers behind a metal barrier that separated them from the tourist section. I had read about the separate seating sections, but did not realize how strict security would be about enforcing the policy. On my first visit to see *cholita* wrestling I went with a guide who had given me a city tour of La Paz earlier

in the day. When I mentioned to her that I was going to see *cholita* wrestling that evening she said that she had never been and would like to join me. But as we entered the building and showed the security guard our tourist tickets, he pointed for me to go to the tourist section while my guide was ushered to the "local" section. This was confusing and disconcerting, but it happened so quickly that there was not much that I could do to protest at the moment. I later learned that, once seated, the people in the "local" section were not allowed to cross the barrier separating them from the tourist section. The tourists had a space where they could walk around, buy souvenirs and snacks and wait in line for the bathroom, but the local Bolivians were not allowed to access this section. Quickly after entering the arena and finding my seat the lights went out and the fighting began.

The show is titled *cholita wrestling*, but there is very little time during the three hour performance when *cholitas* actually wrestle other *cholitas.* The first two or three opening acts only involve two male wrestlers and a referee and are used as a way to introduce the audience to the *lucha libre* style of wrestling. During these opening acts there is very little interaction with the audience and the wrestlers remain, for the most part, in the ring. The following two hours of the show is comprised of one *cholita* fighting against two or more men. It is only in the final act of the show that *cholitas* wrestle each other; the last twenty minutes consisting of four to six *cholitas* performing a carefully staged scene of mayhem.

The majority of the show is comprised of wrestling that revolves around one *cholita* attempting to fight numerous male wrestlers. During this period, the men physically dominate the *cholita* by hitting her, throwing her into the audience,

holding her down, lifting up her skirt and pulling her hair. The *luchadores* do not use traditional *lucha libre* moves such as a "half-nelson" or a "flying sling-shot" that are displayed in the opening acts of the show, instead the men just appear to be chasing around the *cholita* and assaulting her (as seen in figure 3.3). Even though the *cholita* is outnumbered and appears to be losing throughout the entire act, she always escapes at the last possible minute and, inexplicably, is able to pin down numerous men and win the match.



Figure 3.3: Male *luchador* and a *cholita* (Photo by Getty Images)

It is primarily during the acts with one *cholita* that the wrestlers interact with the audience, usually in unpredictable ways. The wrestlers will jump into the audience, throw water and food at the audience, hug and kiss tourists, steal items from the audience and generally do whatever they can to surprise and shock the tourists seated around the ring. During these moments of tourist interaction the wrestlers would jump over or break down the metal barrier separating them from

the tourist section. On one occasion, a female wrestler, who was thrown over the barrier, stole a male tourist's drink and threw it at both the male wrestler and the crowd. During another interaction, a male wrestler leaped over the metal barrier and grabbed a female tourist's hat and then wore it in the ring for the rest of the show. The tourists reacted to these exchanges with enthusiasm and applause (as seen in figure 3.4).



Figure 3.4: Tourists taking pictures of a *cholita* (Photo by Getty Images)

The Audience

As both a researcher and a tourist, the most intriguing aspect of the *cholita* wrestling event was examining how the audience interacted with the wrestlers, their surroundings and each other throughout the show. The audience consisted of two main groups: Local Bolivians and foreign tourists. The local Bolivian audience was almost entirely young families with children and made up approximately sixty percent of the total audience.

The tourist section of the audience was, almost entirely, comprised of a single demographic; North American, European or Australian white men and women in their twenties or early thirties who are backpacking around numerous Latin America countries. The only exception to this pattern that I witnessed was a French couple in their sixties, but they left within the first hour of the show. There were many interesting dynamics within the tourist audience, but for the purposes of this paper, I am going to focus on a couple themes that are particularly noteworthy. They are as follows: Patterns of applause; tourist comments directed at the wrestlers; patterns of photography; and how the tourists describe *cholita* wrestling.

During the event, the Bolivian audience members had a very predictable pattern of applause; for the most part, they clapped and cheered for the *cholitas.* The Bolivian audience was clearly rooting for the *cholitas* throughout the entire fight but would be especially boisterous at the end of the fight when the *cholita* was crowned the winner. Additionally, the Bolivian audience members applauded when a fighter completed a complicated or impressive wrestling move. They did cheer for other things throughout the show, but, for the most part, I was able to decipher a clear pattern of applause. It was more difficult to discover a pattern for the tourist audience; they did not seem to favor either the *cholitas* or the men nor were they that impressed or interested in the wrestling itself.

It was not until after attending my first match that I realized that the tourist audience members cheered most frequently during periods of the show that were unexpected or deviated from what would be expected at a wrestling match. One particular example that illustrates this point occurred during my first trip to see the

cholitas; during a routine act in which the wrestlers were inside the ring and performing traditional *lucha libre* moves and, unexpectedly, a male 'dwarf' dressed in a *pollera* and bowler hat emerged from the backstage and began running around the ring. All of the sudden the previously subdued tourist crowd erupted in applause and immediately started taking pictures of the 'dwarf' running around in *cholita* clothing. This impromptu applause also occurred during the frequent and unexpected moments of audience interaction such as wrestlers touching, kissing or grabbing unsuspecting tourists.

From my perspective as a tourist and a researcher, the most shocking aspect of the *cholita* wrestling show that I did not anticipate was the hyper sexualized nature of the show and the tourist response to this sexualized behavior. Throughout the show the wrestlers engaged in simulated deviant sexual behavior; such as, a man grabbing a woman's genitalia, a woman touching a man's genitalia and a man holding woman down and pretending to rape a *cholita* as she struggles to get away. These were not isolated incidents that happened just one time throughout the show or at only one of the shows that I attended; these actions occurred consistently throughout every show that I attended. The tourists responded to this sexualized and violent behavior with applause and cheer. The tourist comments and actions regarding this behavior was the most surprising theme that emerged during my fieldwork in Bolivia.

Much like the audience applause, there was a clear pattern regarding the nature and frequency of the comments made by the tourists directed at the wrestlers. At the beginning of the event, as the audience became familiar with the

style of the show, the crowd mostly just applauded during moments of the show that they found amusing and otherwise remained silent. After a couple of acts, the crowd quickly became more comfortable with the performance and their surroundings and started to verbalize general comments of surprise, satisfaction or disapproval. For the most part, these comments were things like, "woohoo," "look at that," "this is crazy," "booo," "no," "hit him," and "I can't believe this." But, after a couple hours at the show, the tourists' comments started to mirror the highly sexualized behavior being performed onstage. For example, during a scene where two male wrestlers and the referee were holding down and laying on top of one *cholita* I heard the following comments from two young men sitting next to me, "yeah…hold her down" and "it looks like she is enjoying this." After this exchange, the two young men high-fived each other as they laughed and pointed at the stage.

At first I was surprised at their comments, but I quickly learned that this type of behavior was not an exception or outlier. In fact, as the show progressed into the evening, these sexualized comments became increasingly common. During my second visit to the show I witnessed an example of this behavior that was particularly interesting because it reveals numerous complicated dynamics that are at play during a *cholita* wrestling event. About two hours into one of the shows that I attended, a group of male wrestlers were holding down one *cholita* and pretending to rape her. This simulated gang rape had been going on for a couple minutes when I heard the guy sitting directly behind me yell towards the stage, "Yeah, rape her…haha…show her who's boss." I had already heard numerous comments like this from the tourist audience that night, but what differentiated this interaction was

that quickly after the initial comment a group of five to six guys started to chant, "rape her." I turned around to examine the situation and realized that all of the guys that were chanting seemed to know each other and be in one group. Although this is one of the more graphic examples of sexualized commentary that I witnessed, it is representative of the type of comments and ensuing mob mentality that occurred at each of the wrestling matches that I attended.

During the time that my section of the audience was chanting, "rape her" I realized another seemingly small but significant pattern; the members of the audience who were not involved in the chanting were taking pictures or video recording their fellow tourists. It was then that I began to pay specific attention to what the tourist audience members were taking pictures of instead of just noting the fact that almost every member of the audience had a camera. I quickly realized that the tourists did take many pictures of the actual wrestling; rather, they took pictures of wrestlers interacting with the tourist audience and the separated Bolivian audience. The tourists appeared to be most interested in taking photographs of the Bolivian audience; often leaving their seats to get a better view of the Bolivian section. The tourists would walk right up to the metal barricade and take pictures of the Bolivian audience watching the wrestling match. I was surprised that the Bolivian audience members did not complain, because, to me, it felt like they were being photographed as if they were an exhibit at the zoo. Categorizing the types of photos that the tourists choose to take is significant because it helps to reveal how the tourists chose to capture and frame their time spent at the *cholita* wrestling match in El Alto.

It was during my second trip to see *cholita* wrestling that I started to think about *cholita* wrestling as something other than a classic case of "staged ethnicity." Most of the tourists that I spoke to described *cholita* wrestling as, "fake," "cheesy," "a freak-show," "crazy" and "shocking." Yet, almost all of the tourists said that they would definitely recommend *cholita* wrestling to a friend if they were visiting La Paz. I could not figure out why the tourists I spoke to seemed skeptical about the show, but enthusiastic about the overall experience. During my final visit to see *cholita* wrestling, I sat next to a young man from Denmark who described his thoughts about the show as, "It was way over-the-top and kind of boring, but it is a good option to come and see El Alto. Because there aren't very many safe things for tourists to do up here. And definitely not independently." It was not until after I got back to my hotel room in downtown La Paz that I started to think about his comment and realize that *cholita* wrestling is not appealing to tourists because of its "freak-show" nature, instead it is successful because it packages and sells a safe third-world experience. I stopped thinking about *cholita* wrestling as a place where tourists flock to experience a quirky manifestation of indigenous identity, but instead a business that is successfully tapping into the desire of the tourist to experience their pre-conceived visions of an indigenous third-world nation. To examine how *cholita* wrestling is able to successfully sell a third-world experience, I will now turn to the tourist experience of the event that is often hidden but ever present during a tourist visit to *cholita* wrestling.

The Tourist Experience

The vast majority of tourists who attend *cholita wrestling* do so through the tour company, Andean Secrets. Andean Secrets is a company based in La Paz that exclusively works to bring tourists to see *cholita wrestling.* The agency, which is directly linked to Juan Mamani and *Titanes del Ring,* has a small office located on a side street near a popular downtown street, Avenida 16 de Julio. From my observation, on Saturday's and Sunday's, Andean Secret employees go to popular tourist destinations in La Paz such as the Witches Market, museums and churches and approach tourists with flyers about *cholita wrestling.* It was my experience that Andean Secret employees attempt to sell you a "*Cholita wrestling* package" quickly by promising a "once and a lifetime opportunity that can only occur in La Paz." They also point out that in addition to the wrestling match the package includes: roundtrip transportation from your hotel, snacks, bathroom passes, a souvenir and a short guided tour of El Alto. However, perhaps the most persuasive aspect of the encounter was when the Andean Secret employees tell tourists that nothing will be open on a Sunday evening in La Paz so it is a great opportunity to travel to El Alto and experience local indigenous culture.

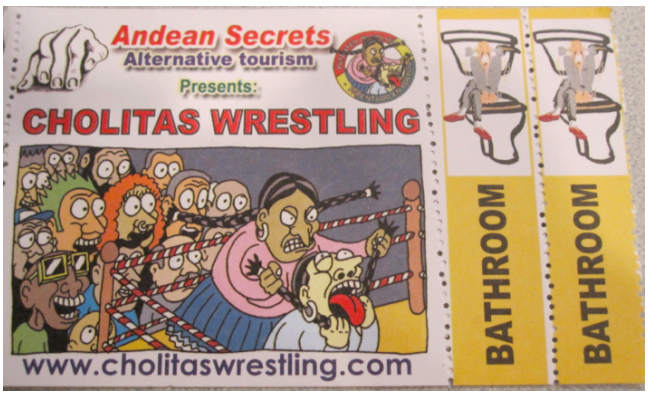


Figure 2.5: Ticket

The name, Andean Secrets, is indicative of the experience that the tour company wants to offer its clients. The tour is organized around the concept of discovery and seeing a world that is otherwise unavailable to the tourists. The tour company wants the tourists to feel like they are, in some small way, vicariously experiencing colonial Bolivia. The tickets and souvenirs that the tour operators hand out reveal how the tour company frames *cholita* wrestlng; they want the tourists to think about the event as a unique and alternative experience that they could not have elsewhere. The image on the ticket illustrates that the event organizers want the tourists to perceive *cholita* wrestling as a shocking show categorized by the *cholitas* ethnicity and their Andean identity (as seen in figure 3.5).

The tour itself was poorly organized and chaotic in nature. The bus picked us up from the hotel late and seemed to get lost during the driving tour of El Alto, which caused a loud argument between the driver and the Andean Secret staff. The guided tour of El Alto consisted of a brief drive around the city as the tour operator pointed to sites of interest. Luckily, we did not miss any of the show because when we finally arrived at the arena we realized that the show was running even farther behind in schedule. Even though Mamani's wrestling group, *Titanes del Ring* have been performing in the same arena every Sunday for the past ten years, each time I visited it seemed like it was the first time that the wrestling group had ever performed in that arena. Throughout the show there were many logistical or technological factors that caused delays in the performance, such as problems with the lighting or loudspeakers, not having enough chairs for the tourists, having

problems with the wrestling ring itself and general confusion among the wrestlers about when they should be on stage.

It was not until later that I realized that this apparent disorganization is, in a large part, what makes *cholita wrestling* so popular among the young twenty-something backpacking crowd. Mamani is appealing to the desire for the unexpected in his target demographic. Young adults who backpack around South America are often hoping to have unplanned "authentic" experiences that they believe that they are unable to have in the museums of Europe or North America. At the *cholita wrestling* match, Mamani is not trying to convince anyone that *cholita* wrestling is an authentic performance of indigenous culture. Instead, he is successfully selling the entire experience of traveling to El Alto to see a *cholita* wrestling show as an "authentic" third-world adventure. The majority of tourists realize that *cholita* wrestling is a completely staged experience before they ever step foot in the arena in El Alto. This creates the question, why do backpackers, a category of travelers who label more traditional types of travel as inauthentic, flock to *cholita* wrestling every Sunday even though they understand that the event is staged for tourists?

Analysis

If tourists know that *cholita* wrestling is staged before they arrive in El Alto, the question remains, why is *cholita* wrestling such a popular tourist destination? To answer this question, I would like to think about *cholita* wrestling not as a neutral site of superficial tourist consumption, but as a constructed space where indigeneity is performed and consumed.

The El Alto location of *cholita* wrestling is significant. As the home to nearly one million indigenous inhabitants, El Alto is one of the key bases of indigenous political power in the country and is largely responsible for the 2005 election of President Evo Morales. Most tourists visiting Bolivia are at least somewhat aware of the country's tumultuous history and, to many, the recent political upheaval acts as an exciting backdrop to their backpacking trip. But, after arriving in the country, it is clear that most of the indigenous people visible on the streets of La Paz commute from El Alto to work and leave the city each night. As a tourist, it was difficult for me to reconcile my pre-conceived notions about a primarily indigenous Bolivia with the up-market surroundings of my hotel in downtown La Paz. Tourists attend *cholita* wrestling to be able to go to El Alto and witness what they perceive to be the "real Bolivia" and consume indigenous culture, but, in reality, they receive a commodified and packaged experience designed to reinforce their preconceived notions of Bolivia.

Urry's (2002) notion of the "post-tourist" can help us understand why a backpacker, a type of tourist who seeks the authentic, knowingly attends a completely staged event. According to Urry (2002), the "post-tourist" is a tourist who no longer needs to leave the comfort of their own home to experience what the world has to offer. Instead, they use the internet, television and guidebooks to learn about what lies ahead on their next vacation. These mediatized representations of what they see at home greatly influence how they frame and understand the events they eventually encounter first-hand on vacation. Although backpackers pride themselves on taking the road-less-traveled, in reality, these roads are very well

traveled because most backpackers rely on guidebooks such as Lonely Planet or Rough Guides for advice about what to go see, where to eat and where to sleep. As a result, backpackers often receive the popular and packaged experience they intended to avoid, but are satisfied because their experiences mirror what they read about in their guidebook, read about on a blog or watched on a travel show at home. When the "post-tourist" leaves home they do so with a set of information about a location and seek to match their travel experiences with their pre-conceived expectations about what the "authentic" experience should be like. Bruner (2001) discusses this concept of authenticity in his article about ethnic and colonial tourism in Africa, "At the Sundowner, tourists receive drinks, food, a good show, an occasion to socialize, a chance to express their privileged status, an opportunity to experience vicariously the adventure of colonial Kenya, and a confirmation of their prior image of Africa" (p. 894). As Bruner illustrates in this example, a successful tourist encounter relies on the host culture's ability to mirror the expectations of the tourist and replicate their pre-conceived notions about the culture or location. In this case of *cholita* wrestling, the location successfully replicates an atmosphere that resembles the tourists expectations and communicates a colonial narrative about indigenous culture and discovery.

As a means to enter the globalized economy in countries where it might be otherwise impossible, indigenous cultures often produce these conditions of "staged ethnicity" and "staged authenticity" in an attempt to attract tourism revenue. But, as Hutchins (2010) points out in his article about ecotourism in the Amazon, "indigenous communities aren't sucked naively into globalization, nor are they

hurled back out as residue" (p. 4). In the case of *cholita* wrestling, Juan Mamani intentionally produced *cholita* wrestling to tap into the tourist desire to discover the "exotic" or "authentic" side of Bolivia. Even though tourists know that the wrestling is not an authentic representation of indigenous culture, they seem to think that the overall experience is authentic. The Andean Secrets tour plays a central role in this appearance of authenticity because the tour operators are the first point of contact for the tourists and provide the frame for their experience in El Alto. The tour picks the tourists up at their hotels in La Paz, gives a quick guided tour of El Alto, hands out the tickets to the show and then takes the tourists back to their hotels at the end of the show. The initial drive from La Paz to El Alto is, arguably, the most significant event for achieving the feeling of authenticity. The Andean Secrets van picks up the tourists at their hotels and then travels through the streets of La Paz as it climbs up the steep hill to El Alto. Once in El Alto, the guided tour consists of a chaotic drive around the winding streets and alley ways that appear to have no discernable pattern. Symbolically, this drive represents a discovery of the unknown and exotic.

The tour actively works to perpetuate the tourist notion that El Alto is an indigenous city marked by extreme poverty and lack of resources that are common in La Paz. Conklin (2010) discusses the connection between the perception of authenticity and indigenous identity in her article about tourism in the Amazon, "indigenous people who fail to live up to outsiders' expectations tend to be devalued or dismissed as inauthentic or illegitimate " (p. 133). As Conklin illustrates, to be perceived as a real or authentic "Indian" they must appear to be poor and disconnected from common consumer resources. By confirming the tourists'

expectations and positioning the indigenous citizens of El Alto as impoverished and primitive, the tour frames the experience as authentic. The Andean Secrets tour communicates a colonial narrative about primitive "Indians" and taps into the tourist desire to discover the exotic. The tourists leave the tour bus and enter the arena with idea that, although the wrestling event is staged, their experience in El Alto was authentic. For many of the tourists at a *cholita* wrestling event, this is lens through which they view the wrestling match.

Although the Andean Secrets tour allowed tourists to vicariously recreate the colonial experience of exotic discovery, the colonial power dynamics were most apparent during the wrestling match itself. The two aspects of the event that stood out the most were the policing of space in the arena and the tourist reaction to the sexualized behavior in the wrestling ring. The layout of the arena is a physical manifestation of the value placed on the tourist audience and the privileged status that they hold. Not only do tourists have ring-side seating that is segregated from the local Bolivian audience, but also the tourist audience is able to walk around once the match starts whereas the local Bolivians, once seated, are not allowed to leave their barricaded section. The Bolivian audience is even denied access to the bathroom. The policing of space is significant because it illustrates the tangible effects of discrimination present at the *cholita* wrestling match where space is a resource reserved for the tourists. In the arena, the policing of space really indicates a policing of race. This physical layout helps to create an atmosphere in which tourists feel both entitled and encouraged to contribute to the culture at the event that promotes sexual violence on the female indigenous body.

During the wrestling match, I was surprised at the tourist reaction to the sexualized and violent nature of the show. Many of the male tourists who were shouting comments such as, "rape her," or "it looks like she likes it," appeared to be "normal" guys who I could have easily been friends with in different circumstances. More shocking to me, however, was the fact that many of them appeared to be with their girlfriends. These seemingly normal men were behaving in a way that was incongruous with my perception of them and how, I think, they would normally behave. I do not think that if it had been their mothers, sisters or girlfriends on the stage they would have responded with the same sexual commentary. This behavior occurred because, according to the tourist audience, the *cholitas* are categorically different from white women; their indigenous identity places them into the category of the "other." The wrestling match is centered around the *cholitas'* identity and showcases their ethnicity for tourist consumption. This staging of indigenous ethnicity encourages the tourists to think about the *cholitas* as different and exotic. Placing the *cholitas* into the category of the "other" makes it easier to not only tolerate but also applaud acts of sexual violence against indigenous women. Whitehead (2010) discussed this dynamic, "This discursive production of 'natives' continues to create a broad cultural framework in which violence against indigenous persons can be more easily obscured or justified" (p. 106). The layout of the arena, the content of the show and the location of the event combine to create an atmosphere where it is easy for tourists to think about indigenous Bolivians as inherently different and, consequently, place them into the category of the "other."

Cholita wrestling is a case of staged ethnicity and staged authenticity designed to mirror colonial power dynamics of inequality.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

I started this project with the desire to learn more about how *cholita* wrestling is represented, viewed and understood. After my initial research, I realized that there is a disconnect between the accounts of *cholita* wrestling that I read about in newspaper articles and what I saw in video clips on the internet. The newspaper articles positioned *cholita* wrestling as a quirky manifestation of a larger feminist movement that is sweeping across Bolivia, while the online videos depicted the event as misogynistic and exploitative. This divide reveals the disconnect between the local narrative of transformative change and the narrative of global inequality created for the tourists.

The *cholita* women assert that they are using the wrestling ring as a platform to advance the feminist struggle in Bolivia. Carmen Rosa, a *cholita* wrestler, echoes this belief in a 2008 interview with the *Guardian* newspaper: "Men ate the cake and left us the crumbs. But now we are united and advancing. The idea is to show that women can do it own their own." The *cholitas* are using their position as wrestlers to convey a message of female empowerment to the local women of El Alto and contest the dominant culture of sexism that is pervasive throughout Bolivian society. The *cholitas* are enacting cultural politics by using culture as a way to alter the political ideology surrounding women's rights in Bolivia (Alvarez et. al.). However, this local narrative of female empowerment does not translate to outside tourists who attend *cholita* wrestling.

My experience, as a tourist and researcher, led me to conclude that *cholita* wrestling is a site that promotes misogynistic culture and exploits alterity. Many foreign tourists, largely from North America and Europe, arrive in Bolivia with preconceived notions that revolve around poverty, ethnicity and revolution and the *cholita* wrestling match confirms their preconceptions. Instead of encouraging the tourists to seriously think about issues of gender, class and ethnicity, the show is actively designed to recreate colonial power dynamics where the female indigenous body is site for sexual consumption (Canessa, 2007). The location in El Alto, the segregated seating arrangement and sexualized content of the show all contribute to this feeling that the needs of the tourists are privileged. Instead of unsettling the culture of sexism, the show exhibits some of the ugly aspects of the global dominant political ideology that privileges the western world of North America and Europe.

The disconnect between my ethnographic findings and the local narrative of female empowerment promoted by the *cholitas*, indicates that *cholita* wrestling is a site of complex interaction that cannot be easily categorized or labeled. There are various power dynamics at play, creating an environment that is largely shaped by the power imbalance created by the lasting effects of colonialism.

The "coloniality of power" was apparent throughout the *cholita* wrestling event (Quijano, 2000). The *cholitas* use their platform in the ring to fight against colonial themes of gender inequality. However, the tourists experience at a *cholita* wrestling event is characterized by colonial power dynamics. The segregated seating and overall policing of space set the tone for the entire event, letting the

tourists know that, from the minute that they walked in the stadium, they held a privileged position over the local Bolivians. The content of the show repeatedly reinforced the concept that an indigenous woman's body is a site for violence and sexual consumption. The physical layout of the event and the sexualized content of the show combine to create an atmosphere in which mob-like behavior is encouraged. This presentation of ethnicity appeals to the tourist desire to experience the exotic, and, symbolically, recreate the experience of the Spanish conquest. Thurlow and Jaworski (2010) expand on the connection between tourism and colonialism:

> The neocolonial agenda driving tourism offers globalization as a lifestyle resource, yet in most types of mass tourism only one party in the encounter may exercise a discourse of mastery, while the other must appear as subservient, romanticized, eroticized and pre-modern (p. 235).

Cholita wrestling offers tourists the opportunity to confirm their romanticized preconceptions about Bolivia. But, by viewing Bolivia through the lens of *cholita* wrestling and, in some way, re-enacting the role of the colonizers, the tourists are unable to see the lasting effects of colonialism on Bolivian society and the role that they play in this power dynamic based on inequality.

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