THE WORLD OF LUCHA LIBRE

SECRETS, REVELATIONS, AND MEXICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

HEATHER LEVI

THE WORLD OF **LUCHA LIBRE**

AMERICAN ENCOUNTERS/GLOBAL INTERACTIONS

A series edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Emily S. Rosenberg

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Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO FOUR PEOPLE:

To my mother, Edith E. Levi. To Isabel Pinedo, whose friendship has weathered the storms of change. To Anne Rubenstein, who has proven to be as good a colleague as she is a friend, and as good a friend as she is a colleague. To Luis Jaramillo Martinez, Aguila Blanca, who was kind enough to take me under his wing.

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PREFACE

Mexico's 1988 presidential election was the first time the ruling Partido de la Revolución Institucional (Party of the Institutional Revolution, PRI) had faced a serious electoral challenge since 1940. The party candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, handpicked by the outgoing president, faced the usual ineffectual challenge from the right-wing Partido de Accion Nacional (Party of National Action) and their candidate Manuel J. Cloutier. More unusual, and more problematic for the party candidate's legitimation, was a challenge from the left. A major recession in 1982 followed by a devastating earthquake in 1985 had seriously weakened the party's formerly undisputed hegemony in Mexican politics. The earthquake, in which thousands died and tens of thousands more were left homeless in Mexico City alone, revealed the cracks and fissures in the political as well as geological terrain. Some of the worst damage occurred in hospitals and housing projects, government buildings that had been constructed with federal funds. In the aftermath of the earthquake critics blamed the government for failure to enforce building codes before the earthquake and for a slow and ineffective response

in the days that followed. The government's response to the earthquake itself was slow and ineffective. In the face of apparent bureaucratic indifference, city residents formed improvised brigades to dig through the rubble in search of survivors and shelter those who had lost their homes.

In the year following the earthquake, the political landscape of Mexico shifted. In Mexico City, a number of grassroots organizations emerged to demand housing for those left homeless by the disaster. By the end of 1986, these groups united with a number of tenant's rights organizations to form a coalition called the Asemblea de Barrios. Meanwhile, a left-wing coalition that included a group of dissident members of the PRI put forth its own candidate for president, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of the populist former president Lázaro Cárdenas. With the recruitment of Cárdenas, the new party, calling itself the Partido de la Revolucion Democrática (Party of the *Democratic* Revolution), appropriated the legitimating symbols of the PRI, positioning itself as the real heir of the Mexican Revolution.

Although the Asemblea de Barrios later endorsed Cárdenas, its members were initially unwilling to compromise their independence by endorsing *any* party. Instead, on November 17, 1987, they unveiled their own candidate in front of the Juarez Monument in the Alameda Park: Superbarrio. Resplendent in his red and yellow tights, boots and cape, the letter S printed on his chest, his face covered by his mask, the candidate promised to perform "superpolitics of Superbarrio for housing, employment, schools and land" (quoted in Cuéllar Vasquez 1993: 128). Soon after, Superbarrio withdrew his candidacy and threw his weight behind Cárdenas and the PRD. Salinas de Gortari won the presidency in an election marked by widespread accusations of fraud and spent the next six years implementing the neoliberal economic programs that were to lead to NAFTA and the Zapatista rebellion. Superbarrio, meanwhile, became a fixture of the left-wing opposition in Mexico City, acting as official spokesman for the Asemblea de Barrios.

Superbarrio's political career draws on a performance genre that can be seen live at least four nights a week in the Mexico City metropolitan area alone, and on television at least weekly: *lucha libre* (literally, free wrestling or free struggle), the Mexican version of professional wrestling. The history of professional wrestling in Mexico goes back to 1933, when a promoter named Salvador Luttheroth decided to bring a group of wrestlers from

Texas to Mexico City. Soon afterward, lucha libre came to be among the most popular and culturally resonant entertainments in Mexico. From the mid-1930s on, it was a fixture in working- and lower-class neighborhoods of the capital and many other cities in the center and north of the country. In addition to regular performance in permanent arenas, wrestlers toured small and medium-sized towns throughout Mexico. While lucha libre shares many features with professional wrestling as it is practiced in the United States and elsewhere, it developed in ways specific to its Mexican incarnation.

Lucha libre is popular in Mexico. It's colorful, dramatic, acrobatic—a lot of fun to watch. But why did it make sense for grassroots activists in the mid-1980s to choose a professional wrestler (or, at any rate, someone dressed as a professional wrestler) as their representative? Why, in particular, did it make sense for members of the left-wing opposition to see professional wrestling as a source of symbolic legitimation? The success of figures like Superbarrio lay in the capacity of lucha libre to invoke a series of connections between sometimes contradictory domains: rural and urban, tradition and modernity, ritual and parody, machismo and feminism, politics and spectacle. Lucha libre's capacity to signify has been shaped, in large part, by the particular configuration of media through which it has circulated in Mexico since the 1950s.

In the chapters that follow, I will relate lucha libre to different discursive fields: gender, electoral politics, nationalism, cultural authenticity, corruption, and mass mediation. My argument is that lucha libre (and related phenomena like Superbarrio) makes sense because it is a performance genre that draws on and reproduces a series of contradictions that are broadly intelligible in the context of the shared historical and cultural background of its Mexican fans. Lucha libre is a practice of staging contradictions.[1]

METHODOLOGY

My goal has been to analyze lucha libre as a signifying practice whose meaning is to be found in the interaction between different domains of experience. Lucha libre's capacity to signify is not reducible to or exhausted by the intentions of the performers or the reception strategies of the audience. Its meaning is constructed in the public performance as such, but it is also created and communicated in the daily lives of wrestlers, in the

performance of the wrestling audience, in the circulation of wrestling performances in various forms of mass media, in the circulation of lucha libre imagery outside of the context of the ring, and the overall cultural and political context within which the performance takes place. This work is not, therefore, a community study of wrestlers or of wrestling fans, but a study of lucha libre as a social phenomenon and as a signifying practice. It is the product of fifteen months of multisited fieldwork in Mexico City between 1996 and 1998, with follow-up visits in 1999, 2000, and 2001.

I approached the project with the assumption that in order to understand the use of lucha libre in Mexican political discourse it would be necessary to understand the genre itself, and vice versa. To that end, I used a variety of research strategies. During the fieldwork period, I observed over fifty live wrestling events (as well as a number of televised events), attending to both the performance and (in the former case) the audience reaction. I interviewed a variety of people directly involved in the occupational subculture of lucha libre: wrestlers at different stages of their careers (and affiliated with different leagues), referees, officials, promoters, and reporters. I attended events—dances, retreats, Christmas parties, and so on—sponsored by different institutions in the lucha libre community and observed training sessions in a number of different locations. In addition to these more traditional strategies, I took classes in lucha libre with a retired wrestler, Luis Jaramillo Martinez. Training in lucha libre enabled me to understand both the rules of performance and the process of training and socialization of wrestlers in ways that I would otherwise have missed. In addition to participant observation with wrestlers, I used written materials —magazines, newspapers, archival documents—to examine the representation of lucha libre in the mass media, to keep track of the profession's internal politics (as they circulated in the wrestling magazines), and to reconstruct a history of lucha libre in Mexico City.

This project also seeks to be a history of the circulation of lucha libre, both the performance itself, and the related images and tropes, across different media. I have used archival sources and oral histories to analyze the controversial relationship between lucha libre and mass media. I have, as well, followed the circulation of lucha libre in avant-garde artistic movements and its appropriation in left-wing political discourse, primarily through interviews with artists and political organizers who have used lucha libre imagery in their work.

Most of the Spanish terms used in lucha libre can be easily translated into English. There are some, however, that I have chosen not to translate. North American and Mexican styles of professional wrestling are formally very similar, yet those forms, as I will argue, have undergone subtle yet extensive resignification in the Mexican context. In order to underline the specificity of the Mexican versions of those forms, then, I will keep some terms in Spanish.

In Mexico as elsewhere, professional wrestlers include both women and men. In Spanish, a wrestler is called a *luchador* if male, and a *luchadora* if female. I will use wrestler and luchador interchangeably in situations where distinguishing the gender of the wrestler is unnecessary or undesirable. However, in those sections where I need to distinguish male from female wrestlers, or I need to distinguish Mexican (and other Latin) wrestlers from other wrestlers, I will use the Spanish terms. I will also use the Spanish terms that mark the good guy/bad guy roles in Mexico: *técnico* and *rudo. Técnico* corresponds to the "baby face" role in North American wrestling. *Rudo* corresponds to the North American "heel." Yet for reasons that I will make clear in chapter 3, the ways in which the two roles are conceived, enacted, and evaluated, as well as their connotations, differ in important ways from their U.S. equivalents.

Like many anthropologists, I find myself faced with a dilemma regarding the identification of the men and women whose life histories I recorded, whose parties I attended, who shared their time and opinions. In my case, the problem has a particular twist. As I will show in the chapters to follow, secrecy is an essential element of lucha libre performance. It is difficult to write about lucha libre without revealing at least of few of its secrets. In general, I have chosen to "reveal" those secrets that seem to me to be common knowledge (for the probable readership of this book). In addition, I have decided to use "real" names to identify some of my informants and pseudonyms to identify others. Wrestlers are public figures, many of whom keep their "real" identities hidden. Many who spoke with me did so with the explicit desire that their wrestling names appear in print. In cases where I understood our conversation to be "for the record," I have identified wrestlers and other public figures by their real names, or their wrestling names. In other cases, when wrestlers or others made remarks or expressed opinions that they may not have intended to appear identified with them in print, I have protected their anonymity, separating

the comment from the wrestler who made it. I have also edited some details that might, in print, compromise the ability of masked wrestlers to remain anonymous to their public. I have identified my *profe*[2] by his real name, as I know he would wish.

THE CHAPTERS

This study looks at lucha libre on three levels: as a performance, as a subculture, and as a symbol that circulates in cultural politics and political culture in Mexico. Chapter 1 will introduce lucha libre as an object of study. Professional wrestling is a liminal performance that sits on the border of sport, theater, and ritual. Much of its power as a cultural performance derives, in fact, from its parodic and potentially destabilizing relationship to the category of sport. This chapter will situate lucha libre within two literatures—that of the relationship between sport, modernization, and the formation of the nation-state in Mexico, and that of the semiotics of professional wrestling in the United States and other non-Mexican contexts.

Chapter 2 focuses on the role of secrecy in the production of lucha libre. Lucha libre is constructed around the secret that everyone probably knows: The matches are "fixed." Yet, as I will make clear, the secret of the fixed ending is only one of a number of secrets that animate the genre. Through an account of training in lucha libre, this chapter explores the power of secrecy (and talk about secrets) to organize the socialization of wrestlers and the performance of lucha libre.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 will focus on different aspects of lucha libre performance. Chapter 3 will examine the relationship between wrestlers and the characters they incarnate. One of the features that distinguish professional wrestling from amateur wrestling is that professional wrestlers enter the ring as morally coded characters. Professional wrestling is thus a ritual drama in which good and evil (or at least bad) struggle for domination. Analysts of professional wrestling in anglophone contexts have further observed that wrestling characters represent the social world. Thus, to ask what kinds of characters circulate in lucha libre is to ask what kinds of social actors are possible, who can have agency in the Mexican context. Attention to the moral and social marking of wrestlers thus provides a window onto and commentary on the social and moral cosmos, on the

culturally specific relationship between morality and social action in mid- and late-twentieth-century Mexico.

But wrestling is performed by flesh-and-blood people who, out of a range of motivations, and through the concrete practices of professional wrestling insert themselves into webs of social and institutional relationships. Lucha libre performance thus consists of three levels—the lifeworld of the wrestlers, the complex set of oppositions and alliances between socially marked characters, and the Manichean opposition between the good guys and the bad guys. This chapter will address each of these levels in turn. Section 1, "Real Life," examines the recruitment, socialization, and organization of wrestlers. The second section explores the range of lucha libre characters. Section three explores the discourse of morality in the ring through an analysis of the contrast between the roles of rudo and técnico.

Chapter 4 draws upon the juncture between character and secrecy in lucha libre as it takes up the multiple functions of the lucha libre masks. Masks, masking, and unmasking are themes that pervade not only lucha libre, but also Mexican culture as a whole. This chapter will explain how the mask matters in lucha libre, both by its capacity to shift the rules of performance and by its capacity to align wrestling performances with other discourses about culture and nation, and with Mexico's political culture. The chapter will examine the mask as a means of connecting lucha libre with the discourse of *indigenismo*, which identifies Mexican national culture with that of Mexico's pre-Hispanic past and (with far more ambivalence) its contemporary, subordinated, indigenous ethnic groups. The chapter will also explore the mask as a metaphor in the arena of public politics. It will show how the trope of unmasking in lucha libre, where it functions as a metaphor for risk or loss of status, inverts the trope of unmasking as it appeared in late-twentieth-century Mexican political culture (where it functioned as a metaphor for empowerment). It will then examine the phenomenon of "social wrestlers," the adoption of masked wrestler personae by representatives of social movements in the late 1980s.

Chapter 5 will look at representations of gender in lucha libre. Scholarly treatments of gender in Mexico tend to emphasize the importance of *machismo* (roughly defined as a system of male domination that equates masculine self-worth with the oppression of women and humiliation of other men) as the central organizing principle of the Mexican sex/gender system.

The picture that emerges in the works of writers from Samuel Ramos to Maarit Melhuus is of a coherent, consistent Mexican gender system, in which real men are recognized by their capacity to dominate and penetrate women and less masculine men, women are categorized either as self-sacrificing virgins/mothers or as whores, and effeminate men, in their inevitable failure to defend their boundaries, prop up the masculinity of the machos. In this chapter, I will use an examination of lucha libre as a gendered performance to problematize this account.

The chapter will examine several different gendered identities that are displayed in lucha libre performances: male wrestlers who perform a masculine role, male wrestlers who cross-dress and perform a feminine role (and wrestle against the former), female wrestlers who wrestle each other, and female spectators and fans. Lucha libre is a performance that is open to multiple readings on the axis of representations of gender, even when it is performed by two men. In its most conventional version, lucha libre is a struggle for physical and psychological domination between two machos. But, as I will show, lucha libre performance also functions as a laboratory of gender experimentation that even its most conventional version parodies and problematizes the standard analyses of a Mexican sex/gender system.

Chapter 6 addresses the circulation of lucha libre in Mexico in two senses: as the dissemination of lucha libre performance through the mass media, and as the circulation of lucha libre imagery as an icon of class identity and cultural authenticity. As regards mass media, the chapter will focus on the relationship of lucha libre to film and television. Although lucha libre was televised briefly in the early 1950s, it was not televised between 1955 and 1991. In the interim, it developed as two parallel genres: as a live performance directed to a physically present audience, and as a genre of action movie. I will argue that the lucha libre's exile from television had important consequences for the range of meanings that the genre could communicate. Its return to television in the early 1990s was an important locus of conflict in the world of lucha libre. Hence, I will focus on the history of lucha libre's engagement with television.

This chapter will also return to the theme of the appropriation of lucha libre by political organizers and avant-garde artists that is first addressed in chapter 4. In postrevolutionary Mexico, as in settler states like Australia or Brazil, the discourse of national cultural autonomy has been constructed

largely through identification with (indigenous or African descended) minorities who are, in practice, excluded from the hegemonic culture. In the dominant discourse of postrevolutionary Mexico, the Indian has been considered both the repository of the authentic national culture and the site of backwardness. But if, in the dominant discourse of Mexican nationalism, the sphere of the rural and Indian stood for the realm of the authentic and popular (as well as figuring as a site for state intervention), the urban poor were portrayed as lacking any culture. The remainder of this chapter will focus on a group of artists and intellectuals, sometimes referred to as the neo-pop group, who engaged in a cultural project in opposition to both the official nationalism of the Mexican state and the elitism of the arts community by celebrating urban popular cultural forms as loci of authentic identity. It will explore how and why this group came to define lucha libre, in particular, as a counterhegemonic practice ("popular" rather than "mass" culture), and how their celebration of lucha libre allowed the genre to enter into the new spheres of circulation: "high" art and politics. Finally, I will show how a group of wrestlers and promoters, threatened by the televising of lucha libre, appropriated the discourse of the neo-pop movement to assert the existence of an authentic, traditional form of lucha libre, and to argue that lucha libre, a practice that many believe to be intrinsically vulgar, intrinsically corrupt, was instead a popular tradition, part of the national patrimony, and worthy of the state's protection from corruption and vulgarization.

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PROLOGUE

FIELD NOTES: THURSDAY, MAY 22, 1997, 8:00 P.M.

At the Pista Arena Revolucion, in the *colonia* Mixcoac, the crowd is still pretty thin. The first few rows are full, and there are a few groups of spectators scattered among the upper rows. In the front, small groups of older men sit together and joke with the concessionaires. Groups of four or five teenagers—some male, some mixed, one female—talk among themselves or buy drinks and snacks from the vendors. In the southeast corner, a stern couple in their sixties or seventies sit perfectly straight in their usual seats. She wears a black housedress, her hair tightly coiffed. Her husband wears short sleeves and tan work pants, and a gimme cap that reads PRI. The second and third rows are filled with families as well as more groups of adults. Toddlers are passed from lap to lap, and fathers buy child-sized wrestling masks for their sons from a vendor who wanders from aisle to aisle, a dozen glimmering examples dangling from a stick, a few more perched on his head.

At 8:05 the lights dim in the arena and focus on the ring in the center of the room. A muscular young man dressed in a Powerhouse gym T-shirt, black and white striped

tights, and black boots enters the arena, saunters up to the ring, and hoists himself over the ropes. He is followed by another, dressed in black tights and silver boots, his face covered by a black mask. These, the audience knows, are the *rudos* (roughly, "bad guys"). They stand in the southwest corner of the ring and wait as two more wrestlers leave the dressing rooms and stride into the arena. The first is wearing a red and white lycra bodysuit and a matching mask with an insignia on the cheek. The second is dressed in a black bodysuit with silver horseshoes along the legs and black mask. These, all know, are the *técnicos* (roughly, "good guys"). There are a few scattered cheers to mark their entrance, but most people are still socializing, buying snacks, playing with their children. A mustachioed man at ringside trades barbs with one of the rudos. The announcer, who looks like an accountant in his brown suit, tie, and respectable spectacles, begins to announce the match, as the referee pats down the wrestlers. "In the corner of the *rudoooos*, Albazan and Predador." The first wrestlers to enter raise their fists and exhort the crowd, which pays them little attention. It's the first match of the night, and the audience is not warmed up yet. "In the corner of the *técnicoooos*, Stelaris and Justiciero!" The second pair turn to receive a few cheers. Predador and Stelaris cross to the outside of the ropes, leaving Albazan and Justiciero in the ring. The announcer steps down from the canvas, blows his whistle, and the lucha begins amid the murmurs and laughter of the inattentive audience.

The two men circle each other, then face each other in beginning position. They grapple together, exchanging locks until both fall to the ground. They separate and stand. Albazan sweeps Justiciero's leg. The latter escapes with a backspring, grabs his opponent by the back of the neck, and drops to the ground, throwing Albazan across the ring. The latter finds his feet, turns, and the two go back to grappling, keeping a controlled rhythm. At the referee's signal, they leave, and their partners enter.

As Predador enters the ring, he catches Stelaris off guard with a takedown, then he grabs his leg and twists it. The técnico rolls out of the lock and reverses it, so that the rudo is caught with his arm twisted. Predador escapes the arm lock, but Stelaris hooks him by the elbow and throws him to the ground, this time locking the arm behind his back. Predador twists his body and escapes again. As the lucha continues, the wrestlers increase their speed as they attempt more attacks, more defenses. As the thumps of

bodies striking canvas come in quicker succession, the spectators start to pay closer attention. Predador throws Stelaris across the ring, into Justiciero. He bounces off the ropes into Predador, whom he slaps across the chest with the back of his hand. Predador slaps back. Albazan shouts from behind the ropes, "Hit him, you idiot!" He slips between the ropes to enter the ring. Justiciero, seeing him enter, vaults over the ropes to join the fight. Justiciero and Stelaris glance at one another, separate, and run to opposite corners. They climb onto the third rope, turn, and jump onto Albazan and Predador, pinning them to win the first fall.

The wrestlers return to their sides, waiting for the second round to start. All four enter the ring. The rudos attack the técnicos, swinging at them wildly, but the técnicos duck and the rudos hit each other instead. The técnicos seize the moment and throw the rudos out of the ring. The two rudos stalk the aisles while the referee counts—they have twenty seconds to return to the ring or be disqualified. At the count of seven, Predador enters to face Justiciero. Predador throws him into Albazan, who kicks him from behind the ropes. He crosses the ropes, and the two rudos continue to kick Justiciero. Justiciero drives both from the ring. He leaves and Stelaris enters, with a cry of "yapayapayapa!" The rudos gang up on Stelaris until the referee makes Albazan leave the ring. Justiciero tries to enter the ring, but Albazan runs over and back-kicks him out. Stelaris climbs the ropes to jump onto Predador, but misses, hitting the canvas with a loud whap. Then Justiciero does enter the ring, just in time for Predador to climb the ropes, jump on top of him, and put him into a submission hold. Justiciero wiggles his hands to show that he submits, and the referee pulls the rudo off. The rudos win the second fall.

At the beginning of the third fall, the rudos enter the ring before the técnicos. The crowd is finally warmed up, shouting insults at the rudos. A woman in the third row holds a three-year-old on her lap. She says to the child, "Say 'chinga tu madre' " (fuck your mother), and the child's delighted voice repeats, "Chinga tu madre!" The woman laughs and jostles him on her knee. The técnicos enter together, and the rudos flee. The referee begins the count, and they reenter at seventeen seconds. Albazan squares off against Justiciero. They slap each other. Meanwhile, Predador and Stelaris enter. Predador runs up to Justiciero and, while the referee's back is turned, kicks him in the groin. While Justiciero is bent over, clutching

himself, Predador throws him to the ground. He picks him up, brings him to the ropes, and calls Albazan. Stelaris pulls Predador off of Justiciero, who is recovering from the foul blow. They attempt to put both rudos in an *estrella* lock, but it doesn't work. Justiciero jumps onto Albazan's shoulders, then dives between his legs to put him into a *rana* lock, but, again, fails. Stelaris tries to put Predador in a swastika, but Albazan kicks him from behind, and he releases too soon. Suddenly, Predador grabs Stelaris and falls backward, trapping him with his back in an arc. Meanwhile, Albazan gets behind Justiciero, grabs his wrists, and plants his foot in his back, locking his shoulders. The técnicos wave their hands in submission, and the referee pulls the rudos away, declaring them the winners.

It's a disappointing result for the fans. The older woman in the southeast corner stands up to scold the rudos as they return to the dressing room, but nobody is too upset. After all, it's only the first match of the night, and a short one. These wrestlers are not stars, and there are four more matches to go. And there's always next week, or even the weekend, if you can't wait that long.

1

STAGING CONTRADICTION

In the months leading up to my doctoral fieldwork, when I told people that I intended to study Mexican professional wrestling, their most common response would be to ask: "Is it totally corrupt there, like it is here?" This raised a fairly obvious question: Why did they consider professional wrestling to be corrupt? In fact, professional wrestling is often derided as simplistic, contrived, and full of gratuitous violence. Such criticism, however, is seldom extended to equally simplistic and dangerous practices like hockey, football, or rugby. Those performances are conventionally considered "real" contests of skill. While they may not be classified as high culture, they are not disparaged as "corrupt" or "false," like professional wrestling. Yet the goal of most sports—to score points—is as contrived and artificial as anything that happens in professional wrestling. Why, then, should professional wrestling be the object of more disdain than these other practices?

Perhaps it is because professional wrestling is a liminal genre, one that is closely connected with the category of "sport," but cannot be contained by it. Lucha libre, I have suggested, is a practice of staging contradictions. It is an

embodied performance that communicates apparently conflicting statements about the social world. During its seventy-five-year history in Mexico, it has stood for modernity and tradition, urbanism and indigenismo, honesty and corruption, machismo and feminism. Why should lucha libre be the vehicle of such a complex and contradictory set of associations? I would suggest that its capacity to signify comes from the very fact that it occupies a space somewhere between sport, ritual, and theater and is thus capable of drawing its power from all of those genres.

PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

Professional wrestling is a transnational performance genre that has been the object of the sporadic attention of academics since Roland Barthes's groundbreaking 1957 article "The World of Wrestling." It is a performance genre based on (but also parodying) the conventions of so-called amateur wrestling. Wrestling, in one form or another, is among the oldest and most widespread sports or games in the world. Like other sports and games, wrestling underwent a process of modernization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during which time its rules were codified and its practice organized within particular institutional contexts (such as the university or the club). At the amateur level, wrestling is divided into three main styles: Greco-Roman, Olympic, and Freestyle (or Intercollegiate). In the first two styles, a match ends when one wrestler pins the other's shoulders to the mat. Olympic rules allow leg holds, whereas Greco-Roman rules prohibit contact below the waist. In Freestyle wrestling, a match can end with a pin but can also end if the winner places the loser in an immobilizing hold.

These three forms of amateur wrestling are often called "real" wrestling and distinguished from another type of wrestling that was promoted as a popular entertainment, during the same period, in the United States and parts of Europe. Charles Wilson traces professional wrestling to a style called "collar and elbow" that was developed in Vermont in the early nineteenth century. (The name refers to the starting position, in which each wrestler grasps the other by the elbow with one hand, and the collar with the other.) Vermont soldiers brought collar and elbow wrestling to the barracks of the Civil War, where it became a favorite recreation among Union soldiers. After the army was demobilized, collar and elbow wrestling