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Masked Superheroes: *Lucha Libre* in New York
By Lucina Melesio

Roberto Martínez, 31, crossed the border to the US walking through the desert, like the thousands of Mexican migrants who do this dangerous journey every year. He now lives in New Jersey and is a single father, earning his living as waiter at an Italian restaurant and as zumba instructor. But the first Thursday of every month he puts on a mask, straps on a pair of flashy boots and ties his cape to fight good –as opposed to fighting evil– in the Bronx.

Roberto fights good because he is a *Rudo*, the personification of evil in Mexican *Lucha Libre*, a mix between sport and theatre *à la* Brecht that comes out of Mexico's working class neighborhoods. *Lucha Libre* is very similar to wrestling, though it is more focused on holds and aerial techniques. But what makes it truly different is that wrestlers –called *luchadores*– vow to conceal their identity to the public. They wear a mask representing their character, and they cannot reveal their identity to anyone other than their closest circle.

Back in Mexico *luchadores* acquire a sort of celebrity status of masked heroes called *técnicos* and the villains called *rudos*. “If you lose a fight, you can lose your mask, which is your honor, your dignity as a fighter,” says Roberto. Once a fighter loses his mask he cannot wear it ever again. His identity is publicly revealed, and he is doomed to fight without a mask from thereafter.

“*Lucha Libre* is no game for us, it's something sacred,” Roberto says. “My family has a *Lucha Libre* lineage, we have it in our blood,” he adds with a degree of pride, adding that the tradition of using a mask is borrowed from pre-Hispanic ancestors. “Our Aztec warriors used to fight with masks: eagles, tigers, jaguars, serpents; that's what the masks represent and each one has its own meaning. They represent what you are, what you feel like.”

“To wear a mask is to be empowered; it represents an abstraction that is more than human,” says Heather Levi, a cultural anthropologist at Temple University who has studied *Lucha Libre* in Mexico City. “Power lies in the public secret,” she adds; “the mask is transformative; I've seen retired wrestlers who are older, nice gentlemen, who become transformed when wearing their mask...kind of like a force of nature. It is truly magical.”

“I think that all human beings have a double personality,” Roberto says; “we all have an inner *rudo* and an inner *técnico* [...] my inner *rudo* is the one that comes out when I put on my mask [...] and when I am not doing my role I am a peaceful, simple and social person in my daily life.”

While Roberto has all eyes on him while enacting his character on the ring, he tries to keep a low profile in his daily life –as if is wearing a mask at all times. Roberto is one of millions of undocumented Mexicans working in the US, an invisible

machinery that is ubiquitous in service industry. Millions of workers work in the kitchens of fancy – and not so fancy– restaurants, preparing food from all corners of the world in cities like New York.

According to a recent Pew Research analysis, unauthorized immigrants from Mexico account for at least 75% of the total unauthorized immigrant population in 10 US states. At the same time, in 2013 deportations of Mexican immigrants reached a record high of 314,904, almost twice as much than there were in 2005. Even so, Mexicans still comprise the majority of unauthorized immigrants in the US, accounting for around 52% (almost 6 million) in 2012.

Deportations have been affecting thousands of American citizens whose parents crossed the border illegally, a policy to which Roberto's 14-year old American son is vulnerable to. This is why Roberto conceals his identity both as a *luchador* and undocumented worker. Losing either of his masks would mean the end of what he has so carefully fought for himself and his son. "I've had to cross the border three times through the desert over the past ten years," Roberto says. He has been caught and deported once. "But last time I thought I wouldn't make it...I don't want to do this ever again," an experience he is reluctant to recall to talk about it. "All I can say is that now I know that there is a God, and that thanks to him I am here today."

Roberto's son, also called Roberto, is one of three siblings. He is an American citizen, since he was born in the US –the only one in the family. Through the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA), Roberto hopes to be able to stay in the US with his son. DAPA is an initiative of President Barack Obama to stop deportations of parents of citizens and lawful permanent residents. It was announced on November 2014, expecting to help over 4 million people. But the program has faced strong opposition from the congress, and it is unlikely that it will be implemented. "I did register right away [for DAPA]," Roberto says; "let's hope for the best."

According to another Pew Research analysis, unauthorized immigrants from Mexico account for two-thirds of all eligible for deportation relief under DAPA, which mainly applies to unauthorized immigrant parents of U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident children. About 44% of unauthorized immigrants from Mexico could apply for deportation protection under the programs, compared with 24% of those from other parts of the world, according to Pew.

While fighting to stay on this side of the border, Roberto misses his roots. Though he was raised to learn how to wrestle, he says he was not interested in practising it frequently until he relocated to New Jersey where there was no *Lucha Libre*. Now he organizes his own *Lucha Libre* matches in Wallington, NJ, bringing wrestlers from both Mexico and the U.S. to the ring, while at other times he performs as a *luchador* matched with American wrestlers at different arenas in Brooklyn and Bronx.

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