



LA MANO DEL DESTINO: A LUCHA LIBRE STRUGGLE BETWEEN IDENTITY AND DESTINY

AN INTERVIEW WITH JASON GONZALEZ

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Jason Gonzalez—artistically known as J. Gonzo—is a Chicano artist, freelance illustrator, designer, art and creative director; born and raised in Cypress, CA, he’s now based in Phoenix, AZ. After completing his studies in visual art and graphic design, he apprenticed and tattooed professionally for a number of years before entering the world of advertising and design. For the past 25 years, Gonzo has employed his creative skills at ad agencies, toy and comic companies, design studios, freelancing, and creating his own comic book titled *La Mano del Destino*. One of his most recent incursions in comic art has led to the realization of *La Voz de MAYO: Tata Rambo*, written by journalist Henry Barajas for Top Cow/Image Comics.

La Mano del Destino is a wrestling comic, strongly influenced by the classic mid-century lucha libre environment. Drawing on Greco-Roman wrestling imported from Europe, in the second half of the 19th century Mexican lucha libre began to develop as spectator sport; it was later adapted and performed by theater companies, increasing its popularity and eventually leading to the foundation of the Empresa Mexicana de Lucha Libre in 1933. As several popular culture tropes gained widespread success in the consolidation of Mexican post-revolutionary nationalism—think for example of the imaginaries brought forth by the movies of the so-called *Época de Oro* (1936–59)—lucha libre consolidated as one of the most popular sports entertainment industry, appealing to a heterogeneous mass audience and reaching its apogee in the 60s. The use of masks was introduced in the beginning as a way to give wrestlers a new identity and it became distinctive of Mexican wrestling in the 50s, when the most successful luchadores—such as El Santo, Blue Demon, Rayo de Jalisco—emerged, building a well-rounded character around the mask itself and the mystery behind it.



Jason Gonzalez's comic *La Mano del Destino* draws indeed on the peak of lucha libre, providing a 6-issue story centered on the eponymous protagonist and touching most of the fundamental elements characterizing Mexican lucha.

ANNA MARTA MARINI: The mask is central to the construction of a luchador, his ethos and essence. *La Mano del Destino* revolves around a luchador that was stripped of his mask and makes his comeback. What elements of the mask symbolism, culture, and history you most refer to?

JASON GONZALEZ: Mexico has a long tradition of masked heroes. I have often stated that this may be in part to the way in which LatinX people (specifically Mexican Mestizos—as the majority of the country is) interact with notions of racial identity. Most people in the country (and by extension, people of the Chicano diaspora, of which I am part) are as much Conquistador as they are conquered; both victim and victimizer—so any inherent identity of genetics is fraught with complications of subjugation and repression of one's own lineage. (I should point out that this kind of subsuming of cultures was occurring in Meso-America long before the Spanish arrived and didn't stop with them either. They just make a nice exemplar of this cycle). In the light of these ancestral truths, we choose to define ourselves by action and effect. This is often represented in the heroes of our culture. I think this why the Luchador is culturally resonant—these are people who obliterate their identity (both in and out of the ring—as is the kayfabe¹ of the sport) to be completely defined by what they do and not who they are. As for the specific visual iconography of *La Mano del Destino*'s mask, I wanted it to have a symbol that encapsulated the aforementioned obliteration of ego and, to me, that is the hand with eye in its palm. The hand is representational of action; it's how we put back into the world. Most other sense icons (eyes, ears, mouth) are primarily about taking-in information; our hands represent the work we do. The addition of the eye in the palm is a cross-cultural representation of enlightenment (and enlightened action)—we see this icon in disparate cultures throughout the globe. The way the icon is situated on the masks has the eyes positioned as a third eye as well, further connoting the idea of enlightenment. The rest of the mask was designed to support the icon and still remain congruent with a Mexican and Lucha Libre design aesthetics.

¹ Kayfabe is the suspension of belief mechanism pivotal to the construction of professional wrestling narratives. Staged events are presented to the audience as genuine and not predetermined, creating a fictional reality fueled by the public interaction during matches; the wrestler should not break character in any moment of the show. Whereas the US pro wrestling industry hasn't been too concerned with breaking kayfabe (especially in recent years), in Mexican lucha libre the illusion and staging are often maintained in a total manner, with the luchadores appearing in public exclusively masked—and thus in character—for their whole life.



Among the most famous and beloved luchadores, El Santo—also known as *El Enmascarado de Plata* for his silver mask—stands out for his fruitful career across media and pervasive popularity; aside from the lucha itself, he protagonized publications blending fotonovela and comic, as well as numerous films (52 shot between 1958 and 1982, occasionally accompanied by his historical friend-rival Blue Demon). His performances out of the ring contributed to build his heroic character; from teaching lucha to children (*El Santo contra la invasión de los marcianos*, 1966) to serving as *padrino* to orphans (*El Santo contra los Villanos del Ring*, 1966), El Santo represented a positive hero both in the arena and in the fictional social contexts which provided a realistic base to his fantastic adventures. It's worth noting that—aside from falling into a hybrid subgenre mixing sci-fi, horror, and comedy—the films starring El Santo present long, articulated sequences of pure lucha action, both on the ring and against monstrous antagonists.

AMM: The protagonist, secondary characters, setting, fight choreography, all reprise and enrich the themes of the apogee of Mexican lucha libre and the 60s in particular. I can see indirect and direct references to El Santo for example. What is your relationship with lucha libre? And what are the main references and themes you enjoy and bring to your work?

JG: As a child, I watched and loved Lucha Libre; sometimes through actual matches, but mostly through the El Santo movies I could watch on the Spanish language stations in LA. I speak very little Spanish, but I didn't need to in order to enjoy those films. Later in life, I would come to realize that those 60s movies were indeed the heyday of the Luchador; and also, the apogee of a Mid-Century, Futurist optimism that had consumed the world. They were unapologetically campy and fun; free from cynicism and hand-wringing existential crises. I enjoyed the representation of Luchador as the paragon of modernity and sought to capture that sentiment within my comic book. I also enjoy the comic books from the 60s that similarly relished the operatic camp of unabashed optimism. Media as elevated and performative allegory and metaphor was displaced by the quest for naturalism in the 70s, which, to my taste, implies losing its emotional impact in its attempts at realism; so I sought to create my comic with the same sensibilities as those in the 60s. Thematically, I am always obsessed with destiny versus identity—from Oedipus to the Iron Giant—this is a theme, perhaps because of my complicated relation to identity, that I always seem to include and engage with.

The thorough contextual research the artist carried out emerges in the comic book, through both the accurate stylization of the setting—especially with regard to architecture and mod—and the reprise of the visual language and narratives typical of Silver Age comics, produced indeed between the mid-50s and the start of the 70s. As he describes his creative process in the special content for collected edition of the



La mano del Destino, Gonzalez stresses out the importance of the palette he chose. He first selected a limited palette for his hero, giving him a “chromatic signature within the story” (Gonzalez TBC); La Mano’s main color is a bright chartreuse, accompanied by fuchsia and cerulean to complete the scheme. The rest of colors composing the small palette are warm, natural hues the artist combines to create contextual elements without conflicting with the characters’ schemes. Gonzalez doesn’t employ any gradients and uses teal to provide color shadows bringing the whole palette together; furthermore, he maximizes his limited palette by adding textures and Ben-Day patterns.

AMM: The graphics are definitely a strong point of the series, while the lucha sequences are absolutely engaging and accomplished. What is your creative process on those?

JG: With the match sequences, I recall all the great moments of physical storytelling that I have witnessed in Lucha Libre and American wrestling over my many years of fandom and try to apply some of the lessons I have learned. I think of the plot of each match (the high and low points; the physical and mental obstacles to be overcome) and then choreograph the bout; sometimes I personally act it out, sometimes I use action figures or artists models. I identify and extract the key moments of these imaginary matches and then illustrate them with regard to emotional truth of each moment (if a character is feeling weak, I might frame them from a high angle; or crop-in tight on a Luchador’s eyes to show intensity; that sort of thing). I also design each page to maintain a rhythm and add emphasis or speed to each moment with size or placement of panels. Color is its own entire category of consideration. I do employ color for emphasis and emotion, but its application has a complete other set of guidelines.

AMM: The hinted supernatural power element adds a twist to La Mano’s clash with the gang of *rudos* and reminds me as well of El Santo’s movies somehow. Would you say that the struggle to overcome the protagonist’s own limits—as a luchador and as a human—without failing his ethos, is the main character evolution trigger throughout the series?

JG: I would say La Mano del Destino’s arc is that he remains the kind of person, on a core level, that he knows himself to be; despite the entirety of this world giving him every opportunity and reason to become something else to get what he thinks he wants (e.g. his title, his revenge, etc.). He’s a guy who enjoyed what everyone, including himself, would qualify as success and has begun to equate his identity with the trappings intrinsic to this success. He, of course, finds out how easily that can be stripped away from him and has to decide whether he wants his success back or if he’s going to define himself in its absence. As a person who can occupy a



liminal space in society, I am obsessed with the question of “are you going to allow the world to tell you who you are?” —this comic is my meditation on that question. I think his struggle is to overcome his ego and socialization. He was told he was unimportant and then worked his way to a social relevance and adoration; only to discover that his hard work had no bearing on whether or not those are taken away. He needs to see that the belt is an abstract and its value is a construct that he is free to negate; so ultimately what was stolen was only as valuable as his quest for vengeance allows it to be.

Identity is definitely a strong pivot in the articulation of the comic, from the choice of theme itself to the diegetic devices employed by Gonzalez to give depth to his character. Furthermore, *La Mano del Destino* provides a fresh, different take on both lucha libre and Mexican representation in US comics, moving away from stereotypes reduced to oversimplified iconography and vintage, postcard-like imaginary of Mexico. His vision is markedly personal and hybrid, bringing forth a powerful Mexican American voice that goes beyond Chicano paradigms.

AMM: Family drama is pivotal to the protagonist’s life choices and it permeates the whole narrative. It also brings forth some historical context, local family dynamics, social conflicts and such. How did you come up with the storyline and would you say it is, as well, part of the underlying Mexican cultural roots of the story?

JG: I began the story development by simply wanting to a Lucha Libre story where the wrestling was important, and the Luchadores were treated with respect. I had grown tired of seeing Luchadores as a punchline in American pop culture. I also wanted to showcase Mexican culture with all of its vibrance of hue and tradition in opposition to the sepia-toned representations of Mexican in American media, as well. Then I thought about the kind of stories I enjoy writing and my infatuation with the dilemma “Identity versus Destiny” came to mind; then I realized that the Luchador is a perfect metaphor for an identity of one’s choosing (as opposed to an inherent identity tethered to a destiny) and its fragility. The similarity of wrestling archetypes and Mexican historical figures all just kind of fell into place. I must admit that I was basically writing a Lucha Libre mash-up of Dr Faustus and Pinocchio until about halfway through the second issue when I realized my own subconscious, allegorical connection between Mexican history and culture as a whole and the Lucha Libre story I was writing. I had given some consideration to the history and cultural resonance of masks in the first issue, but the historical class stratification and struggle of Mexico all coalesced when I decide to have the brothers be orphaned (a good way to show that they were reared by society as a whole) and go live with the *Don* type character of the General (a character inspired from a mention in a Steinbeck short story). Once I decided to detail the characters’ histories, I had to reckon with the society of that era and its implications and imposition on



the world of Lucha Libre that I had created; fortunately, those themes were complementary.

The pervasive popular appeal intrinsic to lucha libre—both for Mexican and Mexican American public—has marked its value as temporary way out of everyday hardship for many a supporter. The lively engagement of the audience, entertaining narratives, vibrant characters have built an alternative, fantastic world in which spectators could indulge and be part—if only for a few hours—of a supramaterial dimension, regardless of their ethnicity or social status.

AMM: Do you think the fact that the luchador is always masked allows the public to identify with the “alternative” reality he moves in, where your phenotypical traits don’t matter and you can be a hero no matter what your sociocultural position in real-life society would be?

JG: Absolutely! The maintaining of kayfabe outside the ring is an invitation to the world to continue and co-author the fictional narrative of the ring. Lucha Libre only works if you accept and internalize its logic. Extending that conceit into the real world exemplifies the Luchador’s commitment to the narrative while simultaneously underscoring the fact that “narrative” is the human condition; I mean, who are we if not just a story that we tell ourselves? The Mask is an opportunity to control and subvert the narrative that has foisted upon you and write your own story; I think that kind of empowerment, as fan and performer alike, is very powerful—especially in this region.

AMM: Imagining a sort of post-apocalyptic evolution of our (Western) society due to the present circumstances [the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent implementation of safety measures] and drawing on what you say (are people allowing the status quo to tell them who they are?) do you think the mask could acquire a new meaning in social reality? Instead of flattening, homogenizing, hiding liminal individuality (as it seem to happen in Eastern cultures, where it’s not perceived as problematic to go out with a medical mask as it’s not hindering individual expression anyway), could wearing a mask free us from certain impositions? Wearing a mask, similarly to a luchador, could we state an identity we feel ours and not depending on how society categorizes us?

JG: I don’t really know. The importance of ego and its relation to society as a whole is very specific to the culture they are steeped in. I think the way in which that is subverted and re-contextualized is equally as nuanced—I don’t know that masks would have the same effect in other countries. For example, in the US we would find a way to have the mask be an extension of our ego; through quality or design—eventually we would judge someone by their Gucci mask or Walmart brand. The



US has a penchant for allowing the abstraction of a concept to become tantamount to that concept. Look at our relationship with money; money is an abstraction of value and now what we value is money; those who have it, understand it, can create it—that is why bankers are the richest people in the US. Also, we celebrate ego to obscene level—people are famous for being famous here. The rugged individualism is foundational to the nation. Even our language is foundationally ego driven; English is subject then verb—*who* is acting comes before *what* is being done. That kind of ego inflation isn't going to be cured by masks. We tout ourselves as an egalitarian meritocracy, but little proof of those notions exists in day-to-day life. Other cultures have a more familial approach to identity—like Asian cultures where the individual is an extension of family; even the surnames preceded the given names in those cultures. The ego may be fixed to a familial identity, but its import may not be diminished; and obscuring it may have an unpredictable effect. This is all to say that I am unsure the a true egalitarian meritocracy is even possible on a global scale, but there may be opportunity to crate small arenas for those notions to thrive, but, Like the Dr. Seuss story taught me—if we give all the Sneetches stars, the elite will just have theirs removed and THAT will become the new sigil for elitism.

La Mano del Destino is definitely an interesting comic for many a reason; aside from the stunning art, Gonzalez delivers a transcendent tale delving into some of the dilemmas intrinsic to human nature. It also represents a great, heartfelt tribute to the tradition of Mexican lucha libre and its heroes, as well as a delightful reappropriation of Silver Age comics visual language, infused with a refreshingly bold, invigorating Mexican American spirit.

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SUGGESTED CITATION: Gonzalez, Jason. 2020. "La Mano del Destino: a Lucha Libre Struggle Between Identity and Destiny." Interview with Anna Marta Marini. *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published May 18, 2020.