

from Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* (NY: Viking Press, 2009)

The City Belongs to Everyone

Lucha libre means Mexico's theatrical version of wrestling, but the word *lucha* is less specific than the English word *wrestling*: it means struggle and it is used in a political sense all the time. *Lucha libre*, free struggle, the enormously popular Mexican sport, serves as entertainment with symbolic and political dimensions, a carnival of masculine power and imaginative adventure. Like most sports, *lucha libre* serves as a drama with an unknown outcome for the conflicts between the *tecnicos*, good guys who play by the rules, and *rudos*, who cheat and generally embody evil. The wrestlers are always masked, anonymous, with stage names that have no ordinary names behind them, and so they parade like the figures in a carnival, dressed as gods, heroes, animals, and myths of the past. Among the best-known names are Blue Demon, the Black Shadow, and Thousand Masks. To unmask a wrestler is to defeat him definitively, and wrestlers sometimes compete for their tight-fitting, face-covering headpieces with letters, emblems, or colors that reflect the superhero names of the wrestlers. Ripping another wrestler's mask off is grounds for disqualification.

The most celebrated of all Mexican wrestlers was the silver-masked El Santo, the Saint, whose career spanned four decades, countless victories in the ring, fifty-two films, mostly science fiction and monster movies, and a lot of comic books. A week before he died, he pulled his mask back to reveal his face on television, but he was buried with the mask on. *Lucha libre* is the most carnivalesque of sports, depending on disguise and transformation, embodying metaphysical concerns about power, ethics, and justice.

Until 1987, many wrestlers' careers overflowed the ring into pop culture, but one wrestler came from far outside the ring to wrestle with injustice. Super Barrio emerged from the ruins of the 1985 earthquake,

or rather from the *lucha*, the struggle that came out of the earthquake. When politicians cut ribbons or staged other public events they hoped would reflect well on them, Super Barrio would show up and pressure them to do better by the poor. He confronted landlords; showed up at evictions, meetings, and demonstrations; inspired the strugglers to feel more powerful and confident. He became famous as a sort of latter-day Robin Hood of the urban poor, and he lives on more than two decades after he first appeared. He is credited with stopping ten thousand evictions, and when he appeared on camera in a recent documentary he spoke about his politics in such phrases as, "We have asserted that the city belongs to everyone" and "The credit goes to the people. Who is behind the mask matters least" and "Super Barrio is all of us." Though the only one in costume, he placed everyone around him in carnival mode and opened up the possibilities.

Several men have worn the tight red-and-yellow outfit with the big SB on the chest, but only one man is publicly identified with Super Barrio: ex-revolutionary, former prisoner, *La Jornada* columnist, tenant organizer, and restaurateur Marco Rascón. His restaurant is a little fish joint in a fairly nice part of Mexico City, and he himself is kind, burly, grizzled, and hospitable, even to would-be interviewers with lousy Spanish who show up at closing time. When he spoke of the origins of Super Barrio, he spoke of himself, but also of El Santo. He recalls, "When we initiated the work of working with tenants in the center, in the historic region of Mexico City, there was a landowner who threatened the tenants with eviction. At that time El Santo had just died, so I proposed that the saint of the tenants appear to defend the tenants—it would be the ghost of the saint. At that time we were still very square militants, where playing with humor and with theatrical forms and performance was concerned. Now it is common but back then, we're talking 1983 and we had very rigid ideas. The people who struggled had to show we suffered, that people were exploited, the people had to be sad, the iconography was people that were very angry or very sad; those were the forms of the militancy and social struggle of the Left. I tried to insert humor, but there was no support in that moment.

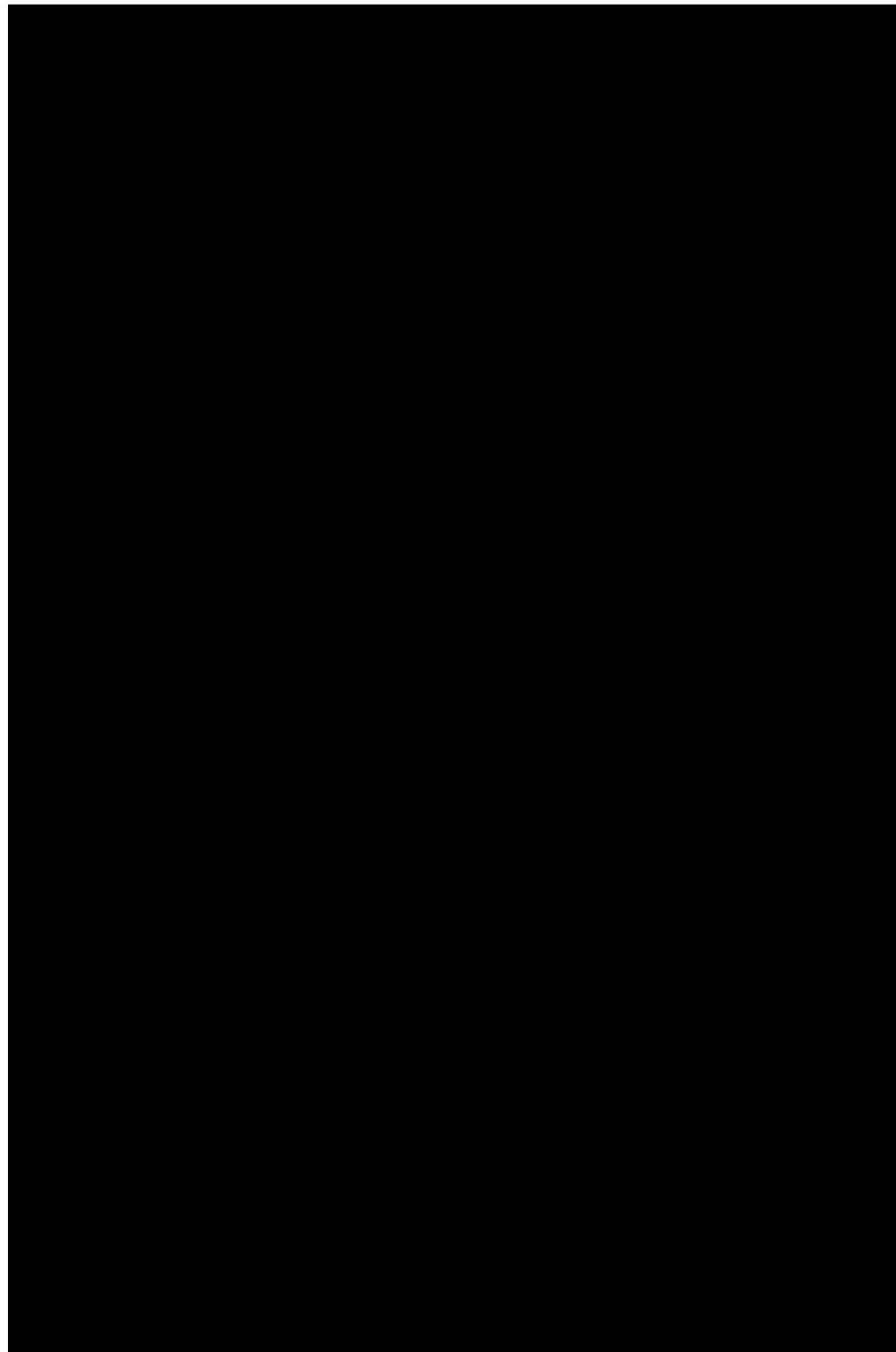
"Another thing that existed in 1985 was that the *lucha libre* was very looked down upon; it was a thing for the poor and for vulgar people—it was vulgar. We went to save a woman so that they wouldn't evict her

from her house—we went to defend her and upon our return I told them the story of El Santo, and we were walking with many people . . . and then we began to say we could do Super Barrio, so one woman said ‘Yes!’ So some went to buy the tennis shoes, and we were saying let’s make it red and yellow because those are the colors that we most wanted; another went to buy the mask, another to make the shield on her sewing machine. The next day, when we had a protest, twelfth of June of 1987, Super Barrio appeared for the first time at a protest at the Angel de Independencia Polanco, where there were some offices.”

Rascón continued, “Super Barrio is a personality whose credibility exists while he has a mask on; without the mask, he doesn’t exist. There’s a similar element to earlier national heroes such as El Santo or Zorro, as well as an echo of the pre-Hispanic origin of masks, the warriors in pre-Columbian times who donned animal masks to adopt their qualities. One of the things that has helped maintain Super Barrio’s credibility is that the government has had to deal with him as a confrontational force. In addition, he has never allowed himself to be separated from his popular origins. When he speaks in public, he speaks in such a way that the average person can understand him. What he’s expressing is the feelings of the people, especially those who get lost in the political discourse. That’s why he’s been able to achieve remarkable things. . . .

“The first time he showed up at a demonstration, he joined the neighborhood commission when they went in to meet with the municipal authorities, who were shocked when they saw a masked figure sitting across the table from them. Nowadays it’s not that surprising, of course, but back then, the fact that they had to face a masked man gave us an important weapon. With Super Barrio, we dominated on their own territory. They got into such a defensive position that they couldn’t say no to us on many matters which they had previously opposed.” A year after the superhero’s birth, he was a player in national politics. Rascón recalls how Super Barrio showed up next to the populist alternative presidential candidate “Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, with his face of a statue, with a masked man at his side. The most serious of politicians with a masked man next to him and these pictures were all going all around the world. Cuauhtémoc, the day of the election, the reporters asked him to say who he voted for. And when he came out of the booth, he said, ‘I voted for Super Barrio.’” The fiction had become real, and the carnival had possessed Mexican politics,

for a carnival that arose from disaster to foment revolution is one way to describe Super Barrio.



As Elias Canetti showed, packed stadiums accentuate the potential of masses of people and can cause those possibilities to spill over. Not that this **is** always a negative: the uncontrollable crowd, when it sees what it's become, sometimes completes the circle and discovers a voice of its own, as well as a critical conscience—as happened at the opening ceremony of the 1986 World Cup, in the Estadio Azteca. A year before, President Miguel de la Madrid had been unable to face the fallout from the earthquake in the capital city. He refused all foreign aid and contributed very little himself to alleviating the catastrophe. The people did far more than the government, turning out in the streets and putting the city back together themselves. And then those same people, gathered in the Estadio Azteca, faced down the elected leader, roundly booing him when he stepped onto the pitch. It's no exaggeration to say that a civil society was born in that very instant, one conscious of its own power, taking the first steps on the long march that would see the PRI voted out of office fourteen years later.

from Juan Villoro, *God Is Round*, p.76