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Oscar “Zeta” Acosta’s American Odyssey

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By the time Oscar “Zeta” Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* was published in 1972, a number of narratives had already employed the road trip to explore the chaotic 1960s American culture and traverse national and international boundaries in the hope that—as Jack Kerouac put it in *On the Road* (1957)—“we would finally learn ourselves” (280). Whether on the page, the movie screen, or blaring from the radio, numerous artists used the road trip narrative to express the idea that traveling through the nation is like having a ticket to enlightenment. Further, the road trip’s transnational scope enabled Anglo-America to experience nonwhite individuals, communities, and “foreign” countries such as Mexico as alternatives to (or, to use Acosta’s phrasing, an “escape” from) western modernity and, for artists, as sources of creative inspiration (31). Sal Paradise’s assertion in *On the Road* that true knowledge of the self is hidden somewhere “among the Fellahin Indians of the world, the essential strain of the basic primitive, wailing humanity” (280) reminds us how firmly entrenched nineteenth-century objectives for mobility are in the countercultural postwar road narrative, whether for the Beats or the hippies. As in nineteenth-century frontier narratives, static representations of non-Anglos as primitive others act as mirrors for Anglo superiority and progress in the twentieth-century road trip, even as these “primitives” supposedly model “authentic,” “natural” living that Anglos might use as an escape from their own modern lives. The timeless “fellahin” in *On the Road* are easily accessible to “Americans on a lark” (280)—indeed, they are “Just across the street [from where] Mexico began” (274)—yet they are still perceived as so distant and “foreign” as to mark for Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty the boundary of their journey, “the end of the road” (276).

Ironically, Sal’s and Dean’s reactions to Mexico anticipate Acosta’s protagonist Oscar’s initial reactions to Mexico and Mexican identity for he, too, essentializes, exoticizes, and is “blinded with love” for the “old women with ancient Indian faces” and “old men with sombreros” (Acosta, *Autobiography* 188-89); in other words, he relates to Mexicans in Juárez as if they are Kerouac’s “fellahin.”¹ Critics such as Rachel Adams and Ramón Saldivar also note Acosta’s disconcerting representation of Mexico, but differentiate him from Kerouac and other Beat precursors because, at the end of Acosta’s novel, his protagonist “translates the

feeling of displacement that stimulates him to travel into the basis for alignment with a political movement” (Adams 71).²

I understand the impetus to highlight Acosta’s call for collective solutions to the identity crisis his protagonist and other Chicanos face, and the text’s (supposed) final rejection of individualism. However, contrary to interpretations of *The Autobiography* that emphasize a turn to collectivist politics, I propose that Oscar never abandons American individualism for a collective political movement because he disavows nationalism or nativism of any type as false consciousness. Oscar cannot regard identity—his, the Chicano community’s, or “American”—in separatist terms, which is why his commitment to the Chicano militants and the Chicano movement dissolves so quickly. This is true for Acosta as well. Even in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973), which documents Acosta’s involvement in the movement after he returns from his solipsistic road trip, and which ostensibly charts his move to Chicano militancy, the contradictory position he takes earlier in *The Autobiography* asserts itself.

Thus, the more important split between Acosta and his Anglo literary counterparts is not that his protagonist develops a newfound affiliation with a political movement at the novel’s close but rather that Oscar develops a syncretic, complex understanding of Chicano and, therefore, American identity while on the road.³ *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*’s road trip structure evidences Acosta’s perceptive racial and cultural “savvy” (119) when he uses the foundational American myth of mobility to contest Chicanos’ ongoing containment and marginalization. As Oscar becomes the cartographer of his past, retracing and remapping his youth, young adulthood, and recent history by careening and carousing through the western half of the United States and through Juárez, he realizes that his “single mistake has been to seek an identity with any one person or nation or with any part of history.” The trip enables Oscar to create his own sense of self that is neither Mexican nor American but both. The journey therefore culminates in a deft challenge to nationalistic and essentialist notions of racial, ethnic, national, and religious identity by those who advance them: “What is clear to me after this sojourn is that I am neither a Mexican nor an American. I am neither a Catholic nor a Protestant. I am a Chicano by ancestry and a Brown Buffalo by choice” (199). And yet, as I will argue, even this significant epiphany about the nature and complexity of identity does not lead Acosta to an understanding of the gendered aspects of his “choice.”

This representation of individual and national identity as multivalent may be what gives Acosta his status as a “troublesome” novelist (Bruce-Novoa 137). Juan Bruce-Novoa argues that Acosta’s problematic stand-

ing is probably due to his "intimate contact with the mainstream counter-culture," which, though unavoidable, was too intimate for some readers, Chicano critics, and activists, leaving him susceptible to derision from those who felt he did not affirm his Chicano identity as fully as he could or should. Bruce-Novoa observes, "I suspect that, more than the flimsiness of Acosta's ethnic foundation, what bothers some Chicano readers is that Acosta draws into question the flimsiness of a Movement based on ethnicity in the context of a mobile and highly versatile society like the United States." Michael Hames-García makes a similar argument when he suggests that Acosta was "launching a very specific critique of the politics of Chicano nationalism and its sometimes naïve assumptions about ethnic authenticity" that "often resulted in an injunction for Chicano artists to find artistic and liberatory truth in highly idealized visions of an authentic indigenous past" (465-66).

Such discussions elucidate Acosta's own radical position that unity based on ethnicity is "untenable under the pressures from both exterior and interior forces" (Bruce-Novoa 139). They complement Acosta's stance by articulating the necessity of further interrogation of established oppositional racial or ethnic identity formulations that, while easy to comprehend, categorize, and analyze, do not allow for realistic, multivalent constructions of individuals or communities. These debates remind us of the utility of work by writers and critics such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Rey Chow, and Stuart Hall, who discuss the reciprocity and continual transformation of cultures, however uneven such transactions may be. As a result, they emphasize the necessity of comparative perspectives in American and Chicano literary and cultural studies.

Acosta's deployment of the road trip structure discredits the myth as untenable for Chicanos/as in a heterogeneous community; he explodes the myth as a liberatory trope, thereby revealing the deep ethnic and racial parameters for mobility that work against Chicanos' attempts to obtain agency and independence. His work makes a case for a complex Chicano and US identity that undercuts the essentialist and nativist conception of individual and national selfhood articulated by Kerouac and other artists. However, even as Acosta challenges ideologies embedded in the road trip narrative that conventionally perpetuate ethnic and racial hierarchies, he leaves intact the narrative's considerable gender conservatism; like his Anglo-American literary counterparts, he does not fully interrogate the road trip narrative's masculinist structure. Several critics have examined Acosta's treatment of gender and sexuality in the context of the Chicano Movement to suggest that Acosta may be presenting a deliberate critique of sexist nationalism rather than an example of it.⁴ Yet even supposing

Acosta falters in his works because his “theorization of identity is not adequate for the kind of liberatory project he envisioned” (Hames-García 478) as it specifically relates to Chicano nationalism, this does not mitigate the larger problem of gender in his narratives.

By employing the trope of the road trip, Acosta relies on a gendered American literary tradition, an aspect of the novel that undermines the larger, radical identity project he attempts to construct. Acosta’s version of what Elizabeth Martínez terms “chingón politics” is a symptom or trace of that larger project’s failure. Martínez asserts that part of the reason for the persistence and pervasiveness of sexism from activist to academic spheres from the 1960s through the present is that women and men must learn “to reject a manhood that rests on demeaning womanhood, a sense of identity for one that requires annihilating the other” (177). Similarly, Denise A. Segura charges that the failure of earlier Chicano activists and scholars to “respect and engage in a sustained gender analysis” was “a political choice, not merely a reflection of the times” (544). Furthermore, when women and men do not view themselves as “linked in a joint struggle against oppression,” this way of thinking has the potential to become “an unconscious excuse for not examining sexism, both external and internalized” (Martínez 177). Acosta succumbs to the excesses of patriarchy, for he is limited by stereotypical formulations for “real” masculinity that have been integral to the American road trip plot and to the frontier narrative—as well as to the Chicano Movement (which he demonstrates later in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*). Ultimately, Acosta’s protagonist invests in being a fully participating member of individualistic American and Chicano patriarchy, with women’s passivity and stasis as a necessary condition for male (physical, social, intellectual, artistic, and sexual) mobility and independence.

Indeed, almost immediately, Sal and Dean’s masculinist movement authorizes Oscar’s own privileged mobility and deployment of the road trip narrative to facilitate his individual and, ultimately, artistic development, doing little to challenge the fundamental conservatism of the American road trip narrative that enables such development. Acosta begins *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* by devoting the first 70 pages (of a relatively short text, 199 pages) to the “Brown Buffalo’s” movement within San Francisco, commencing with the morning of his “escape” (31), and situating him in conventional society. While Oscar is anxious to leave San Francisco, he cannot seem to get out of the city—a struggle that recalls Sal’s inability to get out of New York State. Significantly, Oscar’s difficulty escaping from San Francisco in *The Autobiography* foregrounds Acosta’s opposing desires to exploit and explode the road trip plot. Acosta cannot avoid his literary precursors; in fact, his protagonist is following in

their tracks: "I'm into a fucking time tunnel" (36). He wants to believe his identity crisis and his road trip cure are unique, but neither is free from literary antecedents. Dr. Serbin, the intrusive narrative presence who materializes in the backseat of the Plymouth, offers psychological explanations for Oscar's trance: "self-hypnosis," which is "very common." Dr. Serbin's refusal "to permit [Oscar] the satisfaction of uniqueness" and even the fact that he stops at a liquor store "across the street from City Lights Bookstore" (36), remind us that the Beats and many others have already taken this trip, rendering the Brown Buffalo's movement clichéd. The City Lights Bookstore is an emblem of the Anglo-American Beats who defined Anglo-America's attitudes about movement. The bookstore served as a cultural mecca for primarily Anglo-American hippie countercultural youths who, even by the mid- to late 1960s, still sought to replicate the Beats. Finally, it is a tourist destination for mainstream Americans who wish to participate vicariously in the countercultural movements that, in the popular imagination, took root at this bookstore.

Even Acosta's pun on "Everyman"—"Naturally there's nothing unusual about my condition. All my symptoms have been common to every man for years" (36)—signals a contrary impulse to distance his protagonist from such conventional mobility and to have him enter into it as a representative man. The passage dramatizes not just Oscar's attempt to leave San Francisco in search of his "roots" (196), but also Acosta's attempt to leave the road trip plot that inspires him, again establishing Oscar's entrenchment in mainstream social rebellion as well as Acosta's in Anglo-American literary convention. As Héctor Calderón notes, Acosta "does not admit" the influence the Beats had on him (87), and Oscar reflects Acosta's rejection, asserting that he "had quit reading fiction in the late fifties as a waste of time" (44). Although Acosta's protagonist attempts to separate himself from Kerouac and the novel that put bourgeois Anglo-America on the move, he does so as he packs his books and records to store them, indicating that he plans a return to the conventional world he is trying to escape. The scene captures what Harold Bloom might deem Acosta's authorial or textual anxiety. Acosta is on a mission to recuperate and reorder two pasts: his cultural past and Sal Paradise's past—the US literary tradition of the road trip.⁵

Numerous critics have analyzed how the Beat movement and Kerouac's *On the Road* functioned as literary influences for *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*. Adams and Calderón argue that Acosta must begin his road narrative by leaving San Francisco in order to signal the end of an era and Acosta's conscious separation from the geography that was central to the Beats and 1960s counterculture. After all, as Calderón points out, Acosta leaves San Francisco during the infamous "summer of love."

He argues that *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* “begins precisely in San Francisco on the first day of July 1967, as a response to some very romantic and ultimately escapist solutions to some very real social problems” (86).

On one hand, the journey (ostensibly) enables Oscar to perceive how the Anglo-American establishment assails his, and, by extension, the Chicano community’s ability to associate positively with those aspects of himself that make him Mexican, but the irony is that he already knows this. Ted Casey’s advice to Oscar, “Running ain’t gonna help you,” similarly betrays his foreknowledge.⁶ Thus, the San Francisco narrative is critical to the text as a whole because it offers both a preview of the lessons Oscar learns on the road and evidence that he never needed to “hit the road” (69) to learn them. Perhaps paradoxically, Acosta’s real subversion of Kerouac’s road trip is that he shows the futility for Chicanos of getting on the road—the exercise becomes just another way to avoid the very things one seeks: self-awareness, cultural awareness, resolution of inequities, and a unified identity. Because the liberating tendencies of the road have become a cliché, Acosta must cast aside the Anglo-American myth of mobility to plan another “trip,” tell “another story” (199) more relevant for “a new nation” of Brown Buffalos (198).

Nevertheless, although the Brown Buffalo travels far north and far south in an attempt to remap the Southwest to stake out a territory historically and presently denied him—and, by extension, all Chicanos—in order to enter into a collective consciousness, Acosta does not cast aside the masculine myth of the road. The road trip narrative is revealed here as fundamentally conservative, upholding traditional gender dynamics that tie women to specific social, political, economic, and physical geographies (namely the home or one’s immediate community). For example, although Oscar anticipates his artistic development and burgeoning political consciousness when he asks, “How many times have those black faces, those brown legs, those Okie accents sat in front of me and stared at my red \$567 IBM typewriter? . . . Does anyone seriously believe I can battle Governor Reagan . . . even with my fancy \$567 red IBM?” (28), he does not fully consider how the combined forces of his class status and gender enable his mobility as surely as his female clients’ gender and class restrict theirs. Oscar is free of dependents (spouse or children), while the female clients he depicts are indigent, harangued by creditors, responsible for “dozens” of “seemingly happy, noisy kids” (28), and accountable to abusive or absent husbands. The most significant fact of Oscar’s departure from his life in San Francisco is the ease with which he extricates himself from responsibility. One phone call and one dramatic gesture free him from communal obligation, marking him as different from his Legal Aid

clients who cannot escape their circumstances: "I'm splitting," he tells his boss in the slang of the hippie youth and the Beats before them. He then dramatizes his severed ties by "dumping" his law license in the trash: "I remove my license from the nail on the wall and kiss it goodbye . . . I dump it in the wastepaper basket and my escape begins" (31). Oscar's empty gesture flaunts his indifference to the women who seek his counsel, placing him firmly in the American ethos of individualism that the road trip narrative celebrates and to which men still predominantly have access: "I simply don't care about their bloody noses anymore" (30).⁷ Thus, in spite of his marginalized racial status as a "brown buffalo" in a white world, Oscar is still (even when he leaves it) an independent man with a social position—"employed rather than hired" (29)—in a patriarchal culture, key components for mobility.

Even as a boy, Oscar moves with relative ease. He recalls many instances of wandering throughout his hometown of Riverbank, California, and beyond, figuring himself a regular "Huckleberry Finn" (91) on a search for cigarette butts to smoke. As a teen, his movement is still conventionally masculine and typically postwar American: "The Fearless Four, as we called ourselves, went cruising . . . every night for three years. We searched for snatch. . . . We whistled, honked, flirted and smart-talked every cunt we found on the streets" (107). The overt posturing of Oscar's "cruising" links such movement to sexual conquest as well as physical and psychological conquest. As in other road narratives, conventional gender dynamics and roles are central to maintaining the myth of male mobility. Even Oscar's incredulity at his mother's belief that she still has authority over him when he turns fourteen reveals the ways families perpetuate male mobility and female stasis as inevitable:

All through grammar school my old man had said to me, "You do what I say until you're fourteen. That's when I left home. . . . You obey me until then and then you'll be on your own. . . ." After my fourteenth birthday I was allowed to be on my own. But I had the good sense not to push it. Besides, what would a woman know of such things as smoking and drinking and carousing around. But I could stay out and go where I wanted as long as I didn't throw it in [my mother's] face and maintained the proper respect. (105-06)

Oscar concedes that he must show respect for his mother's wishes, but his quick dismissal of her ("what would a woman know") does not indicate that he curbs the sexualized male mobility to which, at fourteen, he has become heir. Finally, the fact that he spends a good deal of his time in his "old, souped up black and grey '34 Ford" (112), driving with his pals to patronize "Ruby's Banana Ranch" (108), a nearby brothel, makes explicit

the connection between mobility and sexual adventuring. It highlights the point that male movement is always sexualized, and moreover, that the penis is both an “index of masculine value” and a “passport to glorious erotic adventure” (Stavans 53), an adventure denied to women.

Oscar’s recollection of his childhood and adolescence emphasizes further how inherently gendered mobility is and how families, larger communities, and even women themselves regulate female movement (in some ways, more stringently than communities control mobility through race or class). Here, gender difference can become meaningless because when women uphold an “authoritarian ideology of patriarchy” (McCracken 205) and “transmit” the rules men make (Anzaldúa 38) they become complicit in their own oppression.⁸ For instance, the “Mexican” girls the teenaged Oscar knows are “a drag” because they “always stuck to themselves and refused to participate in the various activities” the high school offered (112-13). While some might interpret this scene in terms of racial exclusion, with regard to the road trip, gender, and mobility, the girls’ self-segregation evidences their own indoctrination into femininity. Their behavior underscores the way women learn to “stick together” to police their own sexuality and maintain their propriety.

The prevalence of limiting representations of Chicana womanhood like those Acosta proffers underscores the need for counternarratives, interventions to disrupt the persistent myth of male mobility or illuminate the extent to which female stasis continues to be mandated by fathers, brothers, husbands, lovers, the Catholic Church, and even by gatekeeping women. Recently, road trip narratives by Chicana writers foreground female protagonists who do not have access to the same narrative experience as the male protagonist of *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* but who attempt to claim the right to physical, social, intellectual, sexual, and artistic mobility and freedom.

For instance, in their respective novels, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986) and *Caramelo* (2002), Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros may be in consensus with Acosta about the function of the road trip: they both use movement as a means to assess one’s relationship to self. Movement becomes the occasion for exploring or discovering the self, but this process magnifies when a protagonist’s journey extends beyond national boundaries. But, unlike Acosta, who becomes mired in the framework of the nation, Castillo and Cisneros depict transnational road trips that disrupt the masculinist and liberal individualist orientations of the traditional narrative of the road. The transnational road trip serves not only to facilitate a protagonist’s personal development but also enables the traveler to redefine herself in relation to the multiple cultures and communities of which she is a part. Also unlike the experiences of Acosta’s Oscar or Kerouac’s

Sal and Dean, for Castillo's and Cisneros's female protagonists, freedom has limitations. Because of gender restrictions, Castillo's and Cisneros's representations of the road as a space where their protagonists may generate, confirm, or recreate their sexual, ethnic, national, and artistic identities are ambivalent.⁹

Regardless of whether their protagonists succeed in claiming any type of agency and mobility, both Cisneros and Castillo address women's concerns regarding enforced stasis; moreover, they do so in a collective context. Unlike Acosta, whose narrative registers his protagonist's impulse to write collectively but, in the end, whose individualism prevails, the women in Castillo's and Cisneros's novels attempt to integrate themselves in their communities. Castillo and Cisneros assert that individuals, especially artists (such as Acosta's Oscar believes himself to be), cannot be themselves without a relationship to the collective. This relationship between the female artist/self and her community suggests that it is the artist's task to resolve social and political problems between the individual and the collective by weaving these disparate strands together. Castillo's and Cisneros's representations underscore Phillipa Kafka's point that Chicana critics and writers "adamantly refuse to valorize private solutions characteristic of the heroic, individualistic model of traditional Anglo mainstream literature" (*OutClassed* xiv). They prefer instead to call for "solutions that are collective and political rather than individual and psychological" (Peck 110).

In the end, the primary point of commonality for Castillo, Cisneros, and Acosta is that without careful deployment, the road trip plot conventions can be inimical to anyone except its original heirs. In Chicana/o road trip narratives, a protagonist's movement can be detrimentally influenced or conditioned by the same conventions present in Anglo road narratives, which overwhelmingly maintain gender, race, and class requirements for movement. The markers of freedom portrayed in conventional Anglo-American road trips written by white male authors—for instance, spontaneous and limitless movement, sexual privilege, and racial and ethnic appropriation—carry enormous ideological burdens for Chicana/o authors. Undoubtedly, there is potential for women, non-Anglos, and others to employ the road trip plot to disrupt racial, class, and gender oppression, but it is difficult to do so without maintaining those hierarchies.

Individual movement and freedom, self-discovery, and self-transformation, the underpinnings of the road trip, must be questioned by ethnic American writers who engage the narrative, because there is a real danger in reproducing its inherent problems of conquest, exceptionalism, and patriarchy. With regard to Acosta's narrative, Ramón Saldívar argues that Acosta's "descent into the nightmarish underworld of the American dream" will lead him back "to the active struggles of the beginnings of the

Chicano Movement . . . and the beginnings of a wholesale critique of the assimilationist, consensual American ideological hegemony" (92). Yet, as Acosta's protagonist travels north and then south, he is not just reclaiming a territory to rewrite American history or create a new Chicano or American identity. Acosta also is claiming a literary history and individual artistic identity, and, indeed, the text certainly may be read as a *Künstlerroman*, a novel of the development of an artist. Acosta's relationship to the myth of the solitary American male on the road and, by extension, to traditional masculine representations of the nation suggests that when he embarks uncritically upon the road trip he is dependent upon the very ethos of mobile American masculinity that impedes women's mobility.

When Oscar finally manages to get on the road, his movement, like his contradictory self-representations, is both purposeful and aimless, confident and unsure. Acosta depicts Oscar as an aggressive explorer "hammering and kicking," even plunging "headlong over the mountains" to find his origins (71), yet he also casts him in a fractured fairy tale as an impotent, potentially lost man-child who leaves a beer-can trail in case he cannot find his way home (an ironic necessity considering that he is trying to escape it). Moreover, although Oscar tries to undercut his Chicano authority when he renders his penis "wilted" (71)—as Ilan Stavans acknowledges, Acosta's representations of his fictional masculine self "do nothing to enhance his machismo" (54)—he still has become an independent aggressor, on the road to stake out a territory. A small or wilted penis does not prohibit his mobility or his sense of authority and identity; therefore, such self-deprecating references do not annul his membership in Chicano or Anglo-American patriarchy, however inadequate his masculine self-image may be, for even a wilted penis is part of the drama of American masculinity and the American (male) literary tradition.

Acosta's embracing of this tradition makes it no surprise that the first stop Oscar recounts is in Idaho, specifically, the resort area of Ketchum and Sun Valley, where "Papa" Hemingway lived and died. Movement is intertwined with Oscar's development as an artist in the Idaho narrative, for although he dismisses the hippies' and the Beats' easy mobility, he embraces the rugged adventuring Hemingway embodied and celebrated. Even before Oscar arrives in Ketchum, he appropriates the excessive masculine personae of legendary Hollywood actors such as Gary Cooper, Humphrey Bogart, and Steve McQueen, all of whom play war heroes, outlaw heroes, and loners, quintessential American men struggling against a hostile world. On the one hand, it is possible to read Acosta's emulation of Anglo-American screen legends as calculated. Oscar's own inability to see himself as a whole, capable man except when he is imagining himself as a Hollywood tough guy reminds us that Hollywood is a formidable shaper

of gender, race, and class. Acosta also illustrates that men and women are equally susceptible to such influences. Consequently, it is arguable that Anglo-American patriarchy depicted in American media may be overdetermining Acosta's critique of the road. Of course, American media and American literature, including Beat texts such as Kerouac's, teach that the mobile, adventuring, solitary masculine hero wields authority, agency, and independence to which women do not and should not have access—suggesting that Acosta may be exposing the roots of patriarchy with such stereotypical masculinist, aggressively heterosexist representations when he adopts such personae.

On the other hand, Acosta uses such figures uncritically when his protagonist-self gets on the road, for the mythic male figures remain intact: "I see her sitting on her pack . . . on the outskirts of Ajax, northern Nevada. I shift her down and slow to a stop. . . . 'Want a ride?' Steve McQueen calls to the broad" (97). The stereotypically rugged, Anglo men of Hollywood legend become companions in Oscar's male privilege, and his association with actors Bogart, Cooper, and McQueen reinforces the maleness of mobility.¹⁰ Moreover, if Hemingway is a literary version of the ideology for which men such as Bogart, Cooper, and McQueen stand, Oscar's identification relegates women even further from freedom to the status of sexual object and static muse. The narrative of Oscar's present recounts his Fourth of July in Idaho, beginning with picking up a hitchhiker named Karin Wilmington. Wealthy, Anglo-American Karin's easy, socially-sanctioned movement underscores how crucial class and race are to facilitating a woman's mobility, even during the "summer of love" when all of young America seemed to be frenetically traversing the nation.

Karin crosses state and national boundaries unescorted, but when she accepts Oscar's offer of a ride, her role is solely to inspire his narrative: "By the time we reached Sun Valley, Karin Wilmington knew my life story." Oscar maintains that he is indiscriminate when it comes to telling his life story: "My deepest secrets, my unkindest thoughts I reveal immediately to strangers. I've-got-a-story-and-I've-got-a-song-and-if-you-want-to-ride-along-with-me, well, you've-just-got-to-go-along" (98). Yet, his irritation at Karin Wilmington's questions ("I pouted, not appreciating the interruption" [98]) indicates that a silent muse is necessary for his artistic development. Little wonder, then, that Oscar even references the story of Pygmalion in his description of her: "Languid, blue eyes and a perfect bust, that's my style. This is real class. If only they'd come to life" (122). Oscar, however, does not really want the attractive hitchhiker to "come to life," for a crucial part of Karin Wilmington's appeal is that she is silent.

The encounter with Karin establishes not only that male artists need silent female muses, but also that the writing world is a closed male society.

Women are depicted in the text as pseudo-musicians (the rich mental patient, Barbara) or painters (Maria, who is a regular at a bar that Oscar frequents), but they are never represented as authors. The writing communities Acosta depicts are always made up of males, whether the group is the “intellectuals at S. F. State” (100) in the late fifties or the wild boys of the present counterculture with whom his protagonist associates, including John “Turk” Tibeau, a “poet of sorts” (98), and “Karl King,” the pseudonym for Hunter S. Thompson. When Oscar finds himself at Hemingway’s monument after Karin’s Fourth of July party, his meditations affirm that male artistic development is contingent upon access to a female, sexual, or racial other: “I . . . thought of old Ernie and his corny stories about the Left Bank and all the fine wines and wonderful meals he guzzled with his lesbian friends. I couldn’t understand why he had to go all the way to Paris to look for companionship when Karin and Gerri [Karin’s friend] were just around the corner” (126). Ironically, Oscar leaves Karin and Gerri in search of more adventure in Alpine, Colorado.

The movement of Acosta’s protagonist to Idaho and then to Colorado parallels that of his Anglo-American literary antecedents (Hemingway in Idaho and Kerouac in Colorado) as well as that of his contemporaries (Thompson in Colorado). By extension, Oscar’s analogous movement continues to point to his connection with Anglo male patriarchy. Like *The Autobiography*’s Idaho narrative, the Colorado narrative depicts the writing world as an Anglo, male society, but it also confirms that men’s movement remains integral to the writing process in the American literary tradition. Male writers are associated with an itinerant lifestyle, as evidenced by several of Oscar’s acquaintances, including Tibeau, the poet biker with Idaho and Colorado connections, who “[keeps] constantly on the run between New York and San Francisco” (137), and Karl King, who had “just published a book on the motorcycle outlaws [the Hells Angels] after riding with them for a year” (98). In addition, the narrative’s flashbacks clarify why, in the present, Oscar attempts to find his literary self on the road in the style of Kerouac, Hemingway, and other mobile Anglo-American male writers. After Oscar is discharged from the Air Force in 1956, he enrolls at “Modesto Jr. College to study French and creative writing” (143). The exchange between Oscar and Doc Jennings, his creative writing professor at the junior college, stresses that writing is still a privilege of the male elite and, moreover, that when individuals move for the purpose of creative inspiration, such movement is always hierarchical:

[I]f you want to write, you should . . . when I was your age I wanted to write. We have different backgrounds, I’m sure. My parents were exorbitant. Filthy rich. And they’d raised me in that silver-spoon tradition. . . . Anyway, my first

professor gave me the same advice I'm giving you. . . . he told me if I wanted to write, I should write. I took his advice and left school. I jumped a freight train and . . . but that too is another story. . . . I eventually became a merchant seaman. And I've been writing for thirty years now. (147)

Doc Jennings's movement is gendered and his escapades, including his stint as a merchant seaman, offer the opportunity for quixotic (yet militaristic and thus, masculinist) adventuring that facilitates his writing in ways that Oscar's movement supposedly does not. Doc Jennings becomes a merchant seaman solely to gain material to write good stories, and so his movement is leisured, merely another form of dropping out since he does not rely upon it for education; social, physical, or economic mobility; or even citizenship. Finally, the professor's predictable movement is already a cliché, which indicates the insufficiency of such an endeavor for Acosta, a Chicano, in the mid-1960s.

Doc Jennings's mobility appears to contrast directly with Oscar's, whose own military movement merely reflects the type of mobility poor minority or Anglo men conventionally access—a mobility devoid of spontaneity, romanticism, and adventure. The professor's movement is, however, quite similar to Oscar's superfluous traversing of the United States and his frequent flights from and returns to society. Oscar ultimately takes Doc Jennings's advice and hits the road, but he soon returns to the conventional world—specifically, to academia—to again study creative writing at San Francisco State College. Oscar's account of his time there emphasizes that the Beats' tendency to drop out in the name of self-discovery was neither appropriate nor an option for individuals who did not enjoy the same raced and classed social legitimacy: the "beatniks in the colleges were telling brown buffalos like myself to forget about formal education." Yet, in spite of his criticism of the Anglo beatniks' counsel, Oscar follows the suggestion of another writing professor, Mark Harris, who "repeat[s] Doc Jennings's advice" to drop out of college. Oscar, who "was reading Hemingway at the time and decided that maybe Paris was the place . . . to finish the book [*My Cart for My Casket*]" gets only as far as "East St. Louis before [his] money ran out" (152). Oscar's failure to get to Paris highlights the centrality of class position to accessing leisured mobility. The fact that he only gets to East Saint Louis, a black enclave, elucidates racialized aspects of mobility as well. The young protagonist's inability to follow the expatriate path to Europe confirms just how stratified voluntary vagabondage is in the United States. And yet, paradoxically, the fact that Oscar manages to move as far as he does, whenever he wants, and with such frequency, reveals gender privilege that ultimately bolsters his suitability for membership in the mobile male society of American writers,

even if his class and ethnic positions do not.

When Oscar finally makes it to El Paso and describes the US-Mexico border, the similarity in language and tone between Acosta and Kerouac becomes striking. Both comment on the proximity of the United States to Mexico: Kerouac's Sal wonders that "Just across the street Mexico began" (274); Acosta's Oscar remarks that the El Paso neighborhood of his youth is "just a stone's throw from the border." Initially, Oscar also has a comparable reaction to the individuals who populate the border: he similarly reduces people of Mexican descent to a stereotype. All of the brown people he sees are as unvaried to him as they were to Kerouac. The Beat writer's "fellahin" are, at least, "Mexicans" to Oscar, but they are still "ancient," with "that ancient air of patience which [he'd] always seen in the faces of the *indio* from the mountains of Durango" (184). Men wear sombreros ("straw hats" to Kerouac), and the young women are the "most beautiful . . . with black hair, Graceful asses for strong children; full breasts for sucking life; eyes of black almonds" (188). Oscar further reduces a diverse culture to an essentialized singularity in Juárez: until he makes an intimate acquaintanceship with Sylvia, a redheaded, "peach skin[ned]" *fichera* he meets at a topless bar, he considers "the Mexican as a dark-skinned person" (189-90).¹¹

Yet, while Oscar's vision is less than progressive, Acosta's deployment of the road trip to explore race and ethnicity in the United States is far more complex than Kerouac's and differs substantially. Whereas the people and landscape Sal and Dean encounter in Mexico remain timeless, Oscar revises his conception of identity and casts aside notions of racial or cultural purity. He finally begins to recognize that his "single mistake has been to seek an identity with any one person or nation or with any part of history" (199) when he enters the syncretic world of the topless bar:

But I thought, "White Rabbit?" Gracie Slick in downtown Juarez? I'm looking for a giant Rolaid, a mysterious Pepto Bismol for my hurts. I've come to MEXICO, do you understand? From Riverbank to Panama, to Frisco, to L.A., to Alpine, to Vail and to Juarez . . . and the man wants me to try some screwed-up American hippie chick!

I walked into the topless bar on the corner of Broadway and Grant in North Beach. No, it was the Daisy Duck in Alpine. Or it could have been the strip joint on the Fourth of July Avenue in downtown Panama City. (189)

Oscar seems to have come full circle; he may as well have stayed in San Francisco for all the difference there is between the places he has visited in the US and Juárez. The similarity between disparate countries testifies to US cultural imperialism and how the invasiveness of American popular culture destroys the uniqueness of other nations' culture. Further, spelling

Mexico in all capital letters establishes the extent to which the country has become a fantasyland tourist destination for Oscar and other Americans with time and money to burn. Even Oscar's assertion that he expected Mexico to be the cure for his ills, like a Roloids tablet or Pepto-Bismol, reveals his indoctrination into the privileged myth of the road. For Oscar, as for Kerouac's Sal and Dean, Mexico's foreignness and supposed primitivism are the panacea for the modern man. Strip bars playing Jefferson Airplane are out of place in Mexico.¹²

The close proximity of cultures, whether it is the intersection of San Francisco's "slant-eyed, yellow people" and "black-eyed olive-oils all spliced by a single stop light at Grant & Broadway" (59) or the nearness of Americans and Mexicans at the international border, attests to the intrinsic porousness of cultures, particularly when they are physically connected, and the reality of life in a global world. American culture, represented here by the psychedelic strains of "White Rabbit," crosses borders as easily, it seems, as Oscar does, and "the atmosphere of youthful rebellion" of the 1960s and 1970s certainly was not unique to the United States (Adams 59). Moreover, Oscar's search for self in a place that can be pure only in his imagination is destined to end either in frustration and failure or an awareness of cultural complexity.¹³

In terms of Oscar's road trip, his realization that "I got no roots anywhere" (196) is revolutionary because he learns he has roots everywhere, and that individual and national identity are fluid and shifting. While it may be argued that the absurd, excessive adventures Oscar has on the road catalyze his development as an artist and an individual, the fact is that he always knew these things. The trip is only a way home: he struggles and "plunge[s] headlong over the mountains and into the desert in search of" his identity (71) only to end up right where he began, confirming the advice Ted Casey gave him before he left San Francisco: "Running ain't gonna help you" (69).¹⁴

Yet, at the close of *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, Oscar's mobility, especially as it pertains to his development as an artist, mirrors that of Kerouac and his male, Anglo, artistic contemporaries. Oscar celebrates his newfound political consciousness and his new vocation as a writer, but he does not address the fact that both are gained by gender and national mobility privilege. His easy crossing into and out of Mexico demonstrates that he is able to have experiences others cannot have. Moreover, it is only those who have authority who may become the mobile outlaw Oscar embodies, for even when he is detained in Juárez (he is arrested not for a revolutionary act but for adolescent behavior, for using "*palabras malas*," bad words [193]) Oscar is less "a true border subject . . . incapable of becoming a fully assimilated citizen of either nation" (Adams

71) than he is an American man with the benefits of US citizenship. The issue is not one of assimilation but rather of presumed authority to say or do as he wishes: "It is very simple, your honor. . . . I am an attorney. An American citizen. From California. I don't have my Bar license with me, but as you can tell from my speech, I am an educated man" (192). Oscar is supposedly alienated from his Mexican and American selves, looking to find his identity in the space between Mexican and American. Yet, he is still clearly confident in his status as a man, a lawyer, and an American. He is likewise sure of his exceptionalism, in his ability to transform from a slaughtered buffalo to a leader of historical proportions who cannot be stopped by a Mexican magistrate—and certainly not "a woman!" (192)—or by any other individual or institution, in any country: "Once in every century there comes a man who is chosen to speak for his people. . . . Who will deny that I am unique?" (198).

In addition, Oscar's assertion to the border patrol officer as he tries to cross into El Paso—"I've got nothing on me to prove who I am . . . *just my word*" (195, emphasis added)—foregrounds his most important identity as a writer. Recording the story of his adventures on the road enables Acosta's protagonist to write himself into being:

I sat alone in the back seat of the Greyhound bus as the tires hummed along Route 66 . . . and continued to plan for my next trip. . . . Soon I'd be . . . in East L.A. . . . and some time later I would become Zeta, the world-famous Chicano Lawyer who helped to start the last revolution—but that, as old Doc Jennings would say, is another story. (199)

The novel's open ending anticipates another beginning and another transforming moment that Acosta ties to writing. For Oscar, the road does not lead merely to an identity as an activist but even more to an identity as a writer of revolution: "When I have the one million Brown Buffalos on my side I will present the demands for a new nation to both the U.S. Government and the United Nations . . . and then I'll split and write the book" (198).

By representing Chicano and US identity as syncretic and complex, Acosta rejects the essentialist and nativist conception of individual and national selfhood as it is articulated in so many versions of Kerouac's road myth, and he exposes the limits of racial and ethnic essentialism proffered by many of his fellow artists and activists in the Chicano Movement. However, in the end, Acosta does not question the aggressively masculine figure of the "Chicano warrior-hero" or the patriarchal, nationalist biases of liberation movements that rely on retrograde gender and race conventions to advance their social and political aims.¹⁵ Although Acosta's representation of Chicano masculinity may offer a closer, more critical look at

the gender and racial limitations of the Chicano Movement, he still enters into a masculinist literary tradition that appears to be in earnest, affirming once again the road trip narrative's conservative impulse. Inés Hernández-Avila argues that "freedom [which] is not seen in terms of personal or social responsibility, nor defined with a mutuality that accords everyone the same rights . . . becomes the freedom of privilege, the freedom of entitlement, authorized by right of conquest and enforced by notions of superiority" (195). Her point is crucial, for the Brown Buffalo's new consciousness does not dissolve or even interrogate fully the restrictive gender roles prescribed for literary men and the book leaves intact the gender parameters for mobility. Ultimately, the Whitmanian barbaric yawp that concludes *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* confirms the place of the solitary male artist on the road, and the triumphant Oscar cruises down the legendary Route 66 as he plans his next trip.

Notes

1. In order to differentiate between Oscar "Zeta" Acosta, the writer, and his fictional self, I refer to the protagonist of the novel as Oscar or the "Brown Buffalo" (which Oscar calls himself throughout the text) and to the author as Acosta.
2. See, for example, Rachel Adams and Chapter Four of Ramón Saldívar.
3. Madeline Walker also uses the term "syncretic" to describe Acosta's depiction of Chicanos' "unique combination of Aztec beliefs and Catholic faith" in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (158). Walker argues that Acosta's attention to the elements of "Chicano-style Catholicism" underscores the importance of religion "as an identity marker rather than as a source of belief" (160).
4. Michael Hames-García, who suggests that the most frequent criticisms of Acosta's narratives "accuse him of the sexual chauvinism that has often characterized Chicano cultural nationalism" (473), argues that "the satiric nature of the texts and the flaws of the protagonists" actually point to "a critical representation of sexist nationalism" in both *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (475).
5. Of course, Acosta's desire to make sense of his present and past also situates him in the Chicano literary tradition, which is, according to Juan Bruce-Novoa, "an ordering response to the chaos which threatens to devastate the descendants of Mexicans who now reside in the U. S. A." (114). This double anxiety about two pasts, cultural and literary, is played out in the thematics of the book, and the trip to Mexico is the culmination of Oscar's Oedipus complex first glimpsed in his childhood recollections. At the novel's end, the narrator claims to realize that he is his father's son; he is compelled to obey the maternal judge figure, who orders him to "go home and learn to speak [his] father's language" (194); and he feels sexually attracted to a Mexican woman for the first time since the fantasy about

his mother that opens the novel. These scenes are made ironic by Oscar's code-switching at the border, in which Acosta gives his "word" that he is an American citizen.

6. Although Oscar knows "running ain't gonna help" him, his readers do not yet know this to be the case. For Acosta's audience, part of the journey is learning that Oscar has spent a good portion of his life making escapes—from joining the Air Force after high school in the early 1950s to doing Baptist missionary work in Panama in the early 1960s. These disclosures about his earlier years, revealed through flashbacks while Oscar is on the road, provide the audience with a belated awareness of the reasons for Oscar's intimations that escape is impossible.

7. Some critics read these passages more sympathetically than I do; see, for example, Héctor Calderón, who emphasizes Acosta's ambivalence toward the legal profession; his concomitant sense that he is helpless to effect real social change; the physical manifestations of his stress; and the fact that in such passages Acosta is critiquing the inefficacy of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and Great Society programs.

8. For more information on representations of gatekeeping in Chicana/o literature, see Phillipa Kafka's "*Saddling La Gringa*": *Gatekeeping in Literature by Contemporary Latina Writers*.

9. An analysis of *The Mixquiahuala Letters* and *Caramelo* would show that both texts attempt to move outward to rewrite Chicana identity through the road trip, using the masculinist trope of the road unconventionally to negotiate the relationship between a specifically Chicana feminist subject and her patriarchal community. It is important to note that Castillo's protagonist, Teresa, is unable to sidestep the limiting prescriptions for Chicanas and Mexicanas, signaling that Castillo's project is designed less to offer an instance of a woman transcending societal strictures than to demonstrate that "the current socialization of Chicanas renders them unable to neutralize stereotypic expectations enough to dispel them" (Cooper 172). However, Cisneros's protagonist, Celaya, learns to forge an identity divorced from cultural expectations of static Chicana selfhood and rejects outworn cultural constructs for women that demand she be either a "*puta* or . . . la Virgen de Guadalupe" (325). Therefore, for Cisneros's protagonist, a Chicana road-tripper's negotiation with this genre might lead to a Chicana identity that can resist the narrative closure that older cultural nationalist frameworks seek when they posit an "essence" locatable in a mythical indigenous past.

10. Acosta's critique of how Hollywood's constructions of American masculinity negatively impact Chicano masculinity also reminds us that such representations of masculinity are not unique to Anglo-American cultural institutions. See Ilan Stavans for a discussion of the cultural myth of the "machismo" in Latin American art.

11. *Ficheras* are women who are "paid for tokens or *fichas* they get for drinks sold at their tables," but they also can be exotic dancers or prostitutes (Reid et al. 68-69).

12. Ironically, in spite of Oscar's dismay about the American music blaring out of the Mexican strip bar, Acosta's employment of American pop culture is crucial to understanding his complex, convoluted, and conflicted representation of individual and national identity as heterogeneous. As in the case of Procol Harum's "A Whiter Shade of Pale," Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit" speaks to the necessity of awakening consciousness: "feed your head," the song's final lyrics demand. Furthermore, the notion of awakening consciousness is cast in terms of movement; the song's title refers to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, whose protagonist, Alice, like Oscar, also is on a journey into another world and another way of being.

13. Adams's examination of La Onda, the Mexican youth movement that "[fused] Anglo- and Latin-American influences" to become a "crucible where transnational popular culture met uneasily with the politics and aesthetics of Mexican nationalism" (59), provides a useful context for understanding Oscar's epiphany.

14. Even as Acosta seems to establish his protagonist's Chicano identity as both Mexican and American, proffering a hybrid individual and national identity, he does not posit an endless hybrid identity structure. His representation of his protagonist-self's particular process of identity formation is always rooted in a specific history and social context.

15. For a discussion of the impact "a myriad of male literary identities: el pachuco, el vato loco, el cholo, the Aztec, the militant Chicano, the existential Chicano, the political Chicano, the precocious Chicano, the Jungian Chicano-o-o-o, and mostly authoritarian fathers" (Chabram-Dernersesian 166) have had on Chicana subjectivities and Chicanas' roles in the "[Chicano] movement script," see Angie Chabram-Dernersesian (169-82).

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