

Writing the Fragmented Self in Oscar Zeta Acosta's *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*

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I. Introduction

The opening pages of *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* by Oscar Zeta Acosta feature the narrator Oscar standing in the bathroom, and scrutinizing his huge belly: "I stand naked before the mirror. Every morning of my life I have seen that brown belly from every angle. It has not changed that I can remember. I was always a fat kid. I suck it in and expand an enormous chest... I tighten, suck at the air and recall that Charles Atlas was a ninety-pound weakling when the beach bully kicked sand in his girlfriend's pretty face" (11).¹ Watching his self in the mirror, Oscar reflects upon the bodily self-perfection of the 1920s bodybuilder Charles Atlas, an Italian immigrant originally named Angelo Siciliano. After having migrated to the U.S. in 1910, Siciliano radically changed both his ethnic identity and his own body: he renamed himself Charles Atlas and transformed himself from a "ninety-pound weakling" into a world-famous bodybuilder. On the very first page, Acosta thus presents the reader with the core image of the American Dream—the possibility of self-transformation—and one of the fundamental building blocks of autobiographic writing—the idea of the betterment of the self. At the same time, he deconstructs these very notions on the pages that follow by telling the reader about Oscar's chronic ulcers, his deteriorating mental health, his constipation, and his hallucinations. Oscar curses, vomits, defecates, and devours huge quantities of food. In short, he is

¹ In this paper, the book is referred to as *Autobiography*. It is regarded as one of the key texts of Chicano literature and has inspired numerous critical and artistic responses. One example of its continuing influence on contemporary Chicano literature is Manuel Ramos' novel *Blues for the Buffalo* (1997), in which Chicano detective Luis Montez searches for a missing writer and also investigates the whereabouts of Acosta. One of the characters advises him: "Young man, Mr. Investigator, you have to read the *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*. How can any Chicano go through life, and have even a tiny clue, without reading the books of Oscar Acosta?" (30).

the antithesis of the American Dream: he is an unreliable, irate wreck of a man with serious alcohol problems and a severe drug addiction, bent not on self-perfection but on self-destruction.

Using this problematic depiction of the self, this essay will concern itself with what historian Carlos Muñoz has called “the politics of identity or the identity problematic” (8). I will trace the orchestration of autobiographical elements in the text of one of the most emblematic figures of the civil rights era: the iconic Chicano activist-writer Oscar Zeta Acosta (1935-1974), also known as the Brown Buffalo, who mysteriously disappeared in Mazatlán, Mexico in 1974. An author of two books, Acosta has been regarded as the *enfant terrible* of *el movimiento*. He prominently appeared in Hunter S. Thompson’s well-known narrative *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as the Samoan attorney Doctor Gonzo and presumably played a considerable role in Thompson’s invention of the writing technique of Gonzo journalism. In the *Autobiography*, his first book published in 1972, Acosta uses a first-person narrator to collapse the chasm between the real and the unreal. Even though the title of the book and the name of its protagonist suggest an isomorphic relationship between author and narrator, Acosta subtly undermines the reader’s assumptions and reflects upon the complex act of Chicano identity formation.²

In general, Mexican American literature has produced a substantial body of autobiographical writing, including specifically autobiographical works such as Ernesto Galarza’s *Barrio Boy* (1971) and Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory* (1982), or the veiled autobiographies of José Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho* (1959) and Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1983). According to James Clifford, “prose autobiography has set out many of the thematic preoccupations of Chicano writing” (219). Chicano autobiography has often been linked to an emerging ethnic consciousness, but also to the creation of an essentialist Chicano identity. This line of interpretation sees Acosta’s *Autobiography* as a “Chicano odyssey of self-discovery” which transforms him from “an alienated lawyer of Mexican ancestry” with “no sense of purpose or identity” into “a Chicano activist” and “someone who affirms his Mexi-

² To clarify the important distinction between Acosta the *narrator* and Acosta the *author*, I will use the first name of the narrator “Oscar” when referring to the narrator and “Acosta” when referring to the author of the *Autobiography*.

can roots" (J. Rodriguez 5). However, this interpretation largely ignores the complexity and ambiguity of Acosta's work.

In contrast, I will argue that Oscar Zeta Acosta's text can be placed in the tradition of carnivalesque writing, and that his work is inherently dialogic and polyphonic—it is an orchestration of diverse discourses inspired by written and oral speech. Bakhtin's concept of dialogic polyphony helps to explain that in writing his *Autobiography*, Acosta has in mind the paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and fragmented identity concepts while keeping their potential difference. Acosta essays to construct a new model for a Chicano identity not built on coherence, but on dialogic interaction. Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic therefore allows for a structure of fragmentary existence and a unity in diversity. For Acosta, national identity is not a matter of race or place, but the ability to dialogically imagine oneself as a community. In order to illustrate these points, I will trace the elements of Bakhtin's dialogic principle in the *Autobiography* on four levels: First, I will deal with the level of national identity and autobiography; then, I will discuss the question of authorship at the crossroads of fiction and reality; third, I will scrutinize dialogic elements on the plot level and demonstrate in how far the border plays a pivotal role in the emergence of a polyphonic consciousness. Finally, the analysis will explore how Bakhtin's notion of grotesque realism is realized in Acosta's text.

II. National Identity and the Autobiography

In this first section, I want to put three key concepts into conversation: monologism, polyphony, and the nation. Without question, strong ties have always existed between nationality and autobiography. Autobiographical writing is where, as Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury have put it, "the history of America begins" (17), and there have been numerous examples to support their claim: From Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación*, the biographical writings of William Bradford and Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* to an emerging racial, ethnic, and gender consciousness in the autobiographical writings of Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, and Maxine Hong Kingston, nation has been narration.

The underlying assumption is, of course, that the much disputed term "nation" is constructed along the lines of Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation imagined as a limited, sovereign community. From

this vantage point, national identity becomes an act of imagination that is a construct rather than an essence. Using Anderson's concept, autobiographical narratives can be and have been posited as one of the fundamental building blocks of the nation. This is hardly surprising, as nations and selves share a similar interest: They are both occupied with establishing themselves in their own imaginary space by differentiating themselves from others, thus claiming their sovereignty and independence from their surroundings. The birth of a new self within the boundaries of autobiographical writing has therefore often been linked to the birth of a nation (204-209).³ A prominent point in case is Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1791), which follows the plot of a *Bildungsroman* in that Franklin's self progresses from "Poverty and Obscurity... to a state of Affluence" (538). This linear and steady development from rags to riches and his transformation into a disciplined and rational *zoon politikon* mirrors the unfolding of the American nation after the revolution. Through his individual, subjective and sovereign expression, Franklin's self paradoxically becomes the representative American self. Published after the War of Independence, this autobiography chronicles the birth of a national American identity while simultaneously depicting Franklin's personal growth toward fullness and coherence.

How does Franklin go about defining the American self, and why has his strategy been this successful? One reason is that Franklin presents a unified and coherent picture of self and nation instead of portraying its fragmented and incoherent parts. This effect of unity is achieved through the monologic nature of Franklin's depiction. Going back to Mikhail Bakhtin's fundamental distinction between monologic discourse on the one hand and the dialogic (or alternatively polyphonic) nature of narratives on the other, the monologic discourse employs a single style and expresses a single world-view. Conversely, the dialogic represents an orchestration of diverse discourses entailing different and oftentimes conflicting ideological positions which are put into play with each other.

³ Anderson calls the autobiography the "biography of the nation" and remarks: "[I]dentity..., because it cannot be 'remembered,' must be narrated ... As with modern persons, so it is with nations. Awareness of being imbedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of 'forgetting' the experience of this continuity—product of the ruptures of the late eighteenth century—engenders the need for a narrative of 'identity'" (204).

The monologic system is what ties together Franklin's *Autobiography*: The construction of a unifying self and a coherent national identity presupposes that the "I" of Franklin's writing is alone within its own discourse. As soon as "another's voice, another's accent, the possibility of another's point of view breaks through this play," all claims to unity are necessarily destroyed (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 39).

In this sense, Acosta's *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* is an utter failure. While Franklin's work charts the teleological development of a representative American self in a unifying way, Acosta pictures the ups and downs of a *vato loco*—literally, a "crazy guy"—whose aimless roaming along the dark underbelly of the American Dream reveals anything but coherence.⁴ Acosta aims at rupturing the epic view of the autobiography as a closed unity and at unveiling the process of identity formation as impossible to finalize. Consequently, he posits a new model for a Chicano identity that is based not on a unified and coherent narrative, but on the dialogic principle of identity formation.

Acosta's writing can also be seen as an attempt to present a revisionist perspective on U.S. history, which places him in tradition of what Juan Bruce-Novoa has called the Chicano "obsession with history" (30). Just like Franklin's *Autobiography* contributes to and participates in the symbolizing act of writing history, Acosta's *Autobiography* demands recognition of a distinct Chicano identity within the framework of U.S. cultural production. It is this position that Acosta holds when he remarks: "I speak as a historian, a recorder of events with a sour stomach. I have no love for memories of the past" (18). The argument that Acosta reflects upon the processes of identity formation in the context of a national discourse is supported by the time frame of the book. His *Autobiography* begins on July 1, 1967 and reaches its climax on Independence Day. His character thus comments on racial inequality in the U.S. and demands participation not only on a personal but a national level. However, Acosta does not simply denounce dominant history as partial or false, as his persona realizes that the creation of another monolithic historical account would possibly lead to a mere opposition between two different versions of history. Rather, he seeks to break up the

⁴ For a discussion of the figure of the *vato loco* in Acosta's works, see Smethurst, 119-132.

monological unity of traditional history by dialogically engaging different voices and perspectives in his *Autobiography*.

III. The Author and the Autobiography

The plot of *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* begins on the first day of July 1967: Oscar, an antipoverty-lawyer at the East Oakland Legal Aid society, drives to his office in downtown San Francisco only to discover that his secretary—who usually does most of the work for him—has died over the weekend. Confronted with several women who want to get temporary restraining orders against their husbands, Oscar flees and decides to start a new life. He throws away his lawyer's license, fires his therapist, and spends the rest of the day drinking and doing drugs in a local bar. The next morning, he sets out on a road trip that seemingly turns into a quest for his identity. His travels zigzag from San Francisco to Los Angeles, the Nevada side of Lake Tahoe, Ketchum, Idaho, the ski resort Alpine in Colorado and finally to the twin border cities of El Paso and Juárez; at the end of the text he boards a bus to Los Angeles, where he wants to join the Brown Berets, a radical Chicano activist group. The episodic journey is interspersed with memory fragments of his childhood in rural California and his time in the U.S. Navy and in Panama.

The question arises: in how far is the *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* an autobiography in the usual sense? Scholars have quibbled extensively over this problem. Dieter Herms considers Acosta's text an autobiographical novel (166); Ramón Saldívar has called it "semi-autobiographical" (25); Héctor Calderón stresses that this is "an empirical narrative, a self-portrait" (98), while Frederick Luis Aldama insists that Acosta's work is "a fictional construct" that calls "attention to the fictionality of his facts" and wants to "reform conventions of autobiography" (67, 65).

In a Bakhtinian sense, the very structure of Acosta's *Autobiography* is of a dialogic nature, as fictional elements enter into a dialogue with the factual ones; while the text is not fully fictional, it is not fully "true," either. The author collapses the dichotomy between the real and the unreal by inventing a persona that is fueled both by imagination and real life, fiction and history. The result is a narrative form that postulates a fluid sense of the self that can reinvent itself and throw off the yoke of historical circumstances. As a result, it is nearly impossible to unravel

the history of the “real” Acosta: This becomes clear at the moment one tries to define the usual starting point for an autobiography—the author’s date and place of birth.⁵ Acosta’s birth is recorded in El Paso, Texas, on April 8, 1935—he himself put down his birthday as April 6, 1935 on his application for the California bar. This imprecision of details is mirrored in the *Autobiography*. His fictional self announces: “I am fourteen today... It was April the eighth, 1949 and I was to complete my first year of high school” (105-106). The reader can thus calculate his date of birth: April 8, 1935. At another point in the text, however, he informs the reader on July 1, 1967: “I am thirty-three, the same age as Jesus when he died” (18). This would place his birth in the year 1934. Yet another passage offers the year 1936 as the date of birth. By suggesting three different possibilities, the narrator willfully distances himself from the author of the autobiography, while also maintaining ties with him.

Numerous other historical persons appear in the text under pseudonyms: Hunter S. Thompson becomes the character Karl King, while Robert Henry, a good friend of Acosta, becomes the fat Irish seaman Ted Casey, the Owl; Robert’s wife Ann Henry is featured as Alice. The name of the narrator’s grade school teacher Joan Andersson is actually the name of a lawyer who worked with Acosta on a case during his time in San Francisco. Others, like the 60s drug icon Timothy Leary or the author Mark Harris appear under their own names. Harris is yet another example of how Acosta intentionally plays with reality until it is undistinguishable from fiction: in the acknowledgements on the opening pages of the text, Acosta thanks Mark Harris as his “instructor,” only to deride him in a later part of the book as belonging to the “intellectuals at S.F. State,” those “guys with the tweed coats and fancy pipes” (100). Oscar takes one of Harris’s writing courses only to discover the ineptness of his mentor: “[Harris] asked me if I wanted to read his first draft of *Wake Up, Stupid!* I kept it for a week and returned it to him at the next short story seminar. I only read the first paragraph. After that, I was no

⁵ Acosta’s text begins *in medias res*; his background is revealed slowly in a series of disconnected episodic flashbacks. Acosta thus blurs the lines between past and present and disrupts the tradition of chronological order in autobiographies. In contrast, Franklin’s *Autobiography*, which follows a chronological structure, begins with Franklin’s ancestors and then continues with the birth of the author.

longer afraid of intellectuals. I knew I could tell a better story" (100). Acosta also alters the names of places. In 1967, the author worked as a cook in a Mexican restaurant in Aspen, Colorado. The town appears again in the *Autobiography*, but is called Alpine. Furthermore, important details of Acosta's personal are completely left out, like his family, his wife Betty and his son, Marco. Acosta chose to remodel his persona into an alienated drifter with no family ties. Therefore, the lens that the author Oscar Zeta Acosta uses to portray the life of the narrator Oscar Zeta Acosta distorts and alters biographical realities while simultaneously playing off against them.

Why did Acosta then choose the narrative form of the autobiography to draw up this mostly fictitious life story? The answer lies in the *function* that autobiographies are usually associated with. Writing on Chicano autobiographies, Teresa McKenna has summed it up in this way:

When we speak of autobiographies, we tend to hold certain notions to be self-evident: (1) that we are given the sum total of a person's life and (2) that the account we are given is true. The first idea presupposes continuity, connectedness, coherence, and closure, while the second underscores the nature of the account as history, narration of events, and, therefore, truth. These commonly held aspects of autobiography are not necessarily so, however, because, as writing, autobiography is nothing other than story or narrative. (51)

Acosta, however, does more than simply draw attention to the fictionality of facts. He interweaves his own life story with that of his narrator, so that fact and fiction become an inextricable web of meaning. From a Bakhtinian point of view, he dialogically engages the real and the imagined and turns the narration into a polyphonic discourse.

IV. The Plot

The same effect can be observed on the plot level. It is remarkable how Oscar shifts through various masks and disguises. Instead of assuming one identity, Oscar stares at his mirror image and begins to imagine himself anew:

I stare into the mirror for an answer. See that man with the insignificant eyes drawn back, lips thinned down tight? That suave motherfucker is Mister Joe Cool himself. Yes, old Bogey... And now with the upper lips tightly curled under and baring his top

row of white teeth, can't you tell? See how he nods his head, shaking it from side to side as in a tremble of uncontrollable anger? Right! James Cagney, you rotten scabs! And if you loosen up a bit, puff those fat cheeks out slightly and talk deep in my throat... My name is Edward G. Robinson and I don't want any troubles from you guys. See? (12)

This passage is a prime example of what Bakhtin has termed double-voiced or double-oriented discourse. Oscar gives the reader an insight into his own self by borrowing words and phrases, the syntax and the rhythm from movie characters of the 1940s and 1950s that accompany his imitations. He mimics Bogey's coolness, Cagney's uncontrollable rage and the aloofness of Robinson by appropriating their discourse and using it as part of the narrator's voice. When Oscar says "Yes, old Bogey...", the pause behind the monosyllabic utterance lends it weight and self-assuredness. He then uses short exclamatory sentences intermingled with the slang expression "scabs" to represent Cagney's anger, while the long, drawn-out utterance representing Robinson's dangerous quietness can be read as a reference to his part as a gangster boss in the 1948 movie *Key Largo*. The narrator does not present the three characters through the use of direct speech—instead, he utilizes his own voice, but communicates in their manner of speech. This creates a double consciousness, because the voice of Bogart is heard *through* the narrator's voice which consequently "not only refers to something in the world but also refers to another speech act by another addresser" (Lodge 59).⁶

There are numerous other instances in the text when the reader becomes aware of the fact that the author is not addressing him directly, but rather through the discourse of some other persona. This fluctuating and shifting through identities is continued throughout the narrative. Oscar cannot be contained, as he imagines himself as Ernest Hemingway, García Lorca, Dylan Thomas, and Rocky. In a drug frenzy Oscar takes a look at himself in the mirror and believes himself to be transformed into the Wolfman, a character in a 1941 movie, who is half man,

⁶ In his metalinguistic approach, Bakhtin broadly differentiates between three principal types of discourse: The direct speech of the author, the represented speech of the characters, and the double-voiced speech. The third category is the most important for the dialogic principle and can be divided into several subcategories (stylization, *skaz*, parody, hidden polemic).

half wolf: "I was surprised to see that the drug had made the hair on my otherwise smooth arms grow long and green... My face was now completely covered with hair. Not just the beard, God damn it; I mean my entire body was that of the green Wolfman, good ol' Lon Chaney" (39).

During the course of the text, the narrator's identity is more and more dissolved as he takes on a plethora of jobs: Oscar is an athlete in his high school football team, a binge drinker, a clarinet player in the Air Force Band, writer of the book *My Cart for My Casket*, lawyer, a physical therapist, dishwasher, plumber, and construction worker. As a Southern Baptist missionary in the jungles of Panama, he converts natives to Christianity. In Juárez, he eventually becomes a pimp.

In accordance with these various employments, he freely shifts through ethnic identities. He is identified by himself and others as Samoan, Mexican, Blackfoot Indian, Aztec, "nigger" and "jigaboo." In one instance, Oscar tells the reader: "I grew up a fat, dark Mexican—a Brown Buffalo—and my enemies called me a nigger" (86). In another passage, he writes: "I've been mistaken for American Indian, Spanish, Filipino, Hawaiian, Samoan, and Arabian," but concedes: "No one has ever asked me if I'm a spic or greaser" (68). Oftentimes, these identities conflict with each and contradict the authorial voice. For instance, he tells one listener: "My family is the last of the Aztecs" (140). Here, Oscar invokes the mythic past of the indigenous forebears of the Mexicans only to destroy this past in another instance: "I hate for people to assume that I'm an authority on Mexicans. Just because I'm a brown buffalo doesn't mean I'm the son of Moctezuma, does it? Anyway, I told her I was a Samoan by the name of Henry Hawk" (101). Finally, the satire on a stable ethnic identity reaches its climax when he swallows two aspirins and becomes "a gorilla. No, I didn't *look* like one, I *was* one" (164).

Thus, like other elements in the *Autobiography*, ethnic identity is an equally indeterminable and dialogic process. Ethnic identity is rather something akin to Bakhtin's notion of the "idea" that does not reside in one person's isolated consciousness:

The idea... is not a subjective individual-psychological formation with 'permanent resident's rights' in a person's head; no, the idea is inter-individual and inter-subjective—the realm of its existence is not individual consciousness but dialogic communion between

consciousnesses. The idea is a *live event*, played out at the point of dialogic meeting between two or more consciousnesses... Like the word, the idea wants to be heard, understood, and 'answered' by other voices from other positions. (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 98)

Oscar's narrative is not, as some critics have remarked, a search for a unified and monologic identity or the creation of a unified one out of many selves, but rather the depiction of the many selves in a dialogic interaction.⁷ All the different personae, voices and opinions are not leveled, but rather kept and put next to one another. These ideas and concepts of Oscar's self all undergo an intense struggle of several individual consciousnesses, which are paradoxically all held together in Oscar's imagination. The contradictory potential of ethnic identity is not glossed over but fully realized, which leads to an ambiguous—and oftentimes confusing—narrative complexity.

V. The Border

The ultimate expression of this complexity is Acosta's description of Oscar's journey down south into Mexico and the literal and metaphorical act of crossing the border between the two countries. Here, Oscar undergoes what Bakhtin has termed a *Schwellendialog* ("dialogue of the threshold") (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 111). Oscar's crossing is strategically placed at the very end of the book. This stands in stark contrast to the traditional depiction of border crossings in Chicano writing: Beginning with Daniel Venegas' *The Adventures of Don Chipote* (1928) and continuing with José Antonio Villareal's *Pocho* (1959), Aristeo Brito's *The Devil in Texas* (1976), and Genaro González' *Rainbow's End* (1988), the border crossing as an essential part in the formation of a Chicano consciousness is placed at the opening of the text, not at the very end. For Oscar, the border marks the end of his journey, but paradoxically also the very beginning. His consciousness opens to accept his

⁷ See Joe Rodríguez's essay on Acosta. Aldama reads the *Autobiography* as the "easily recognizable Christian narrative of guilt, confession and redemption" and presupposes a stable final identity because "Acosta will symbolically die in San Francisco to be reborn, resurrected in El Paso as a Chicano and as a leader of his people" (98).

fragmented and polyphonic self not as one, but as the interaction of many consciousnesses.

Before traveling down south, Oscar works odd jobs in the ski resort of Vail, Colorado. Eventually, he tires of “those senseless drugs, those lifeless hippies and those tourist funhogs who clearly didn’t have the answer” (184) and experiences depressions: “I roamed the mountains, soaking up the snow, and cried at the silent, white death” (184). He knows it is time to move on and makes up his mind to “hit the road once more” in the direction of his home town: “I decided to go to El Paso, the place of my birth, to see if I could find the object of my quest. I still wanted to find out who the hell I was” (184). He confronts the border, or rather, the border confronts him on his way to the checkpoint on the Mexican side:

When the thick guard in uniform approached me I felt a tingle in my neck. I had no passport, no identification of any kind whatsoever. I had lost my wallet in Taos several months prior to my entry into Juarez [sic] ... I was certain he would interrogate me... Where have you been? Just who are you anyway, *muchacho*? And just how *would* I explain to him about Mr. Wilkie if I couldn’t speak Spanish? And would they provide an interpreter? *Por favor*? No, I knew it wouldn’t do. I knew I’d be arrested... Impersonating a *mexicano*? Is there such a charge? (187)

As in the passage quoted earlier, the double-oriented discourse in Oscar speech becomes apparent as he appropriates the discourse of the Mexican border guard. The difference, however, is that this time the narrator has a meta-awareness of the two consciousnesses that collide in his speech act. While impersonating the other’s discourse, he is asking himself if “impersonating a *mexicano*” is a charge and therefore expresses his awareness of the act while committing it.

Moreover, Oscar has lost all legal documents that could establish his identity. This proves problematic when he returns from his stay in Mexico and tries to enter the U.S. again. A “tall blond with a .357 Magnum” asks him to prove who he is (“You don’t *look* like an American, you know?”). The question triggers a self-reflexion on the part of Oscar: “Jesus Christ, I think, what *do* I have to prove who I am?... There’s nothing in my pockets but eight *centavos*. I’ve got a clarinet and a camera with a few rags in my traveling bag.” Then, he realizes that his quest for

identity has been futile and admits: "Nothing. I've got nothing on me to prove who I am... just my word" (195).

Oscar's realization that his "word" is the only proof of his identity is more than phrasal expression. The act of crossing the border and confronting an unknown—yet intimately close—culture epitomizes the dialogic nature of self. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin stresses the importance of boundaries and the need for their transgression to reach a full understanding of the self not as an enclosed and finalized entity, but as an open-ended dialogue: "A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another." Oscar's confrontation with an external and fortified border leads to a growing awareness of the importance of "not that which takes place within, but that which takes place on the boundary between one's own and someone else's consciousness, on the threshold" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 287).

This describes what has been called Bakhtin's "principle of permeable boundaries," which he has put into the following words: "[E]verything internal gravitates not toward itself but is turned to the outside and dialogized, every internal experience ends up on the boundary, encounters another, and in this tension-filled encounter lies its entire essence." Essentially, dialogue represents nothing more than a boundary that has to be crossed and re-crossed.⁸

From this perspective, the border is elevated from its marginal status to represent the very essence of the dialogic principle. Oscar's encounter with the boundary of the national territory leads him to accept the impossibility of his quest for a stable and essentialist identity. In the end,

⁸ In "The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art," Bakhtin underscores that what holds true for the individual self holds also true for entire cultures: "One must not, however, imagine the realm of culture as some sort of spatial whole, having boundaries but also having internal territory. The realm of culture has no internal territory: it is entirely distributed along the boundaries, boundaries pass everywhere, through its very aspect, the systematic unity of culture extends into the very atoms of cultural life, it reflects like the sun in each drop of that life. Every cultural act lives essentially on boundaries: in this is its seriousness and its significance; abstracted from boundaries, it loses its soil, it becomes empty, arrogant, it degenerates and dies" (317).

he pawns his final belongings and rents a room at the Grand Hotel in downtown El Paso. Alone in his room, he finds himself back at the beginning of his journey: "I stand naked before the mirror. I cry in sobs. My massive chest quivers and my broad shoulders sag. I am a brown buffalo lonely and afraid in a world I never made" (195). He then calls his brother and tells him: "I've checked it all out and have failed to find the answer to my search. One sonofabitch tells me I'm not Mexican and the other says I'm not American. I got no roots anywhere" (196). However, the *Autobiography* does not end on a note of despair, but rather of hope. Oscar has realized the polyphonic nature of his self and wants to communicate this experience of identity formation by becoming a writer. On the last page, he soliloquizes:

My single mistake has been to seek an identity with any one person or nation or with any part of history... What I see now on this rainy day in January, 1968, 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. Is that so hard for you to understand? (199)

VI. Grotesque Realism

For Bakhtin, the dialogic type of literary discourse has its roots in the serio-comic genres of classical literature, in Menippean satire, Socratic dialogue, and satyr plays. While the Middle Ages channeled the energies of the parodic polyphonic discourse in the unofficial culture of carnival, the Renaissance began to express the carnivalistic through literature; according to Bakhtin, this "boundless world of humorous forms" served to "oppos[e] the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture" (*The Bakhtin Reader* 196). The rise of the novel through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries further augmented the expression of the dialogic through literature. At the very beginning of the evolution of the dialogic discourse thus lies the folk carnival humor with its parodies, its code-switching between Latin and the vernacular, and the popular curses and oaths. These elements find their representation in a mode that Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism," the expression of the satirical impulse of that folk culture. Since the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, the "lowering of all that is high" (*The Bakhtin Reader* 205), the body becomes the central

image within this mode of representation. It is exaggerated through the minute depiction of its organs, the act of eating, belching, vomiting, urinating, defecating and copulating.

All these features can be found in Acosta's *Autobiography*, too, as the material body and its degradation play a highly important role. Oscar is perpetually in the process of eating or drinking, he is belching, vomiting and digesting—all the images of his body are offered in an extremely exaggerated form. Like Rabelais, who was proclaimed by Victor Hugo as the poet of the "flesh" and of the "belly" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 204), Acosta employs the aesthetic concept of grotesque realism to heighten the sense of the communal:

In grotesque realism... the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people... The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, ... but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. (*The Bakhtin Reader* 205)

Therefore, when Oscar is reduced to his base materiality and transformed into a "gargantuan antihero" (Aldama 73), this strategy only underscores the communal plight of all Chicanos. He consumes large quantities of "Snickers bars, liverwurst sandwiches with gobs of mayonnaise and Goddamned caramel sundaes" (11), so that eventually he is turned into a degenerate mass of brown body: "For twelve months now all I have done is stuffed myself, puked wretched collages in a toilet bowl, swallowed 1000 tranquilizers without water, stared at the idiot-box, coddled myself and watched the snakes grow larger inside my head while waiting for the clockhand to turn" (24). The positive bodily image of the carnivalesque is transformed into its absolute negative and expresses a deep uneasiness about and displacement of Chicano ethnicity in U.S. society. Moreover, this image of the body underscores on yet another level the unfinished, unstable nature of Bakhtin's dialogic principle: Oscar's body is not complete in itself, but is steadily growing and transgressing the boundaries of its own self. By stressing the body parts that are open to the outside world (nose, mouth, ears, breasts, and genitals), the body is in a state of becoming rather than being. The apertures enable a communication with the outside world and show a

body that is ever creating and changing through eating, drinking and copulation. Therefore, the body and the world form an inseparable connection and dialogically engage each other.

VII. Conclusion

Summing up, this paper has attempted to show that Bakhtin's principle of the dialogic runs through Acosta's *Autobiography* on various levels: on the macroscopic level, the text lends itself to the observation that contrary to the tradition of a unified, coherent and nationalistically tinged writing of autobiographies, *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* engages the factual and the real in a dialogue and posits a model of Chicano identity that is anti-essentialist. The dialogic principle can be traced all the way down to the microscopic level of the plot, where various voices and identities are placed on a horizontal plane and exist in an ongoing contest with one another; they are never put in a hierarchical order. While authors like Franklin pursue the goal of gathering all discourses in a single unified center, Acosta seeks plurality and fragmentation.

This, however, does not mean that Acosta's text is an unmediated cacophony of discourses. The voices remain part of the authorial orchestration, but are allowed to differ and to alter the outcome of events. The literary figure of Oscar as the poetic expression of Acosta is one voice among the many but is not given ultimate authority. All utterances and the various personae that Oscar assumes and the various views expressed by the different characters are kept in a dialogical balance. Dialogization as a basic distinctive feature of the stylistics of the novel is also applicable to the genre of fictional autobiography.

What Bakhtin has remarked about the ending of Dostoevsky's novels also holds true for the *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*: "[N]othing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and always will be in the future" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 165).

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