

A Browner Shade of Buffalo: Music, Color, and Perception in Oscar Zeta Acosta's New Chicano Identity

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And although my eyes were open,
They might just as well have been closed.

—Procol Harum, “A Whiter Shade of Pale” 1967

Y mis ojos ya, ya, ya vacíos
Van, van rodando sin cesar.

—José Feliciano, “Con su blanca palidez” 1968

Oscar Zeta Acosta remains a difficult figure in the history of Chicano literature, partly due to the excess and ugliness of his two novels—*Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973)—and partly due to the excesses of the man himself, whether excessive intoxication, cultural hybridity, or sheer girth.¹ This essay will reconsider Acosta's relationship to the 1960's counterculture by demonstrating the central role of psychedelic rock music in the *Brown Buffalo* and in its vision of Chicano identity. While scholars have long debated Acosta's relationship to the counterculture,² particularly the Beats, much of this work sets up the counterculture and the emerging Chicano movement in opposition and then seeks to determine to how successfully Acosta's novels break from the former in order to join the latter. In doing so, these scholars not only present the counterculture as culturally daring but politically conservative—thus coining the suggestively oxymoronic category of the so-called “mainstream” counterculture—but more importantly as fundamentally white. To do so is to erase first of all the work of earlier counterculture writers of color such as Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Bob Kaufman, and John Rechy, and second the many Chicanos of the late 1960's and 1970's who, as Randy J. Ontiveros reminds us came

to “identify with the counterculture, but to remain on its periphery,” listening to rock music, using recreational drugs, growing their hair out, or not shaving their legs (24). For Acosta, because the “gonzo style” (journalism or memoir that does not claim objectivity, often featuring stream of consciousness) that he maintained he developed collaboratively with Hunter S. Thompson came to be associated with the latter exclusively, and by extension with the white counterculture, his own voice is often read as derivative of that culture rather than recognized as the original. Within this binary framework, then, Acosta was criticized early on for not supporting firmly enough a stable Chicano identity, and later, with changes in political possibilities and intellectual sensibilities, instead praised precisely for demonstrating the instability of that identity.³

Leaving aside the political relevance of the (mainstream) counterculture, and rather than viewing it as an unfortunate legacy from which Acosta does or does not extricate himself, here I will examine how Acosta makes use of one element of the counterculture, psychedelic rock music, in the course of outlining his vision of Chicano identity. The first four chapters of the novel take place on the day the song “A Whiter Shade of Pale” by Procol Harum was released in the U.S., and he hears it no less than four times, each one dropping him further into an identity crisis that returns him to his long-repressed Mexican childhood. I argue that Acosta uses psychedelic music and altered states of consciousness to demonstrate an unstable, shifting perception of color, especially as it relates to the racialized body. He signals this in his title with the insistently redundant phrase “brown buffalo” echoing the repetition in “a whiter pale,” which introduces a difference into the same. For the author, making the Chicano body visible through a focus on how color is perceived and understood, is the first step in developing a successful political movement. He had confronted racial invisibility in state discourse four years earlier, as an attorney defending two groups of Chicano activists, the East L.A. Thirteen and the Biltmore Six. Only rarely have literary scholars taken interest in his legal work, but in these pivotal 1968 cases, his strategy was to establish the racialized Chicano body within a discourse in which it did not exist, in which Mexicans were officially “white” and therefore not subject to discrimination.

The attention to perception in *Brown Buffalo* can thus be read as an extension of this strategy of making race visible, specifically

by exploring how the categories of perception are variable even as they are a foundation of cognition. Philosopher Jacques Rancière argues that how perception is socially “distributed” is fundamental to politics, and “simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (2006, 13). In his autobiographical novel, Acosta narrates events through visual and auditory experiences. By making hyper-visible his own body and his way of seeing and hearing the world, Acosta performs what Rancière calls the “redistribution of the sensible,” that is,

the cutting up of the perceptual world that anticipates, through its sensible evidence, the distribution of shares and social parties . . . And this redistribution itself presupposes a cutting up of what is visible and what is not, of what can be heard and what cannot, of what is noise and what is speech. (2004, 225)

Brown Buffalo’s hallucinatory representations of color intervene in the ongoing, historically- and contextually-specific portioning-out of what can be sensed or seen. Psychedelic rock music plays a central role in enabling these visions because, in the novel’s representation, it operates on the edge of “what is noise and what is speech,” forcing the protagonist and the reader to reevaluate how they look at the world.

WHEN THE MEXICAN WAS WHITE: THE TRIAL THAT MADE THE CHICANO MOVEMENT

Through a study of court records, Ian F. Haney López reconstructs Acosta’s defense strategy in both cases he tried in 1968. He argues that Acosta’s legal strategy was part of a larger shift among courts and activists to begin to construe Chicano identity as race rather than ethnicity. In the first case, prosecutors indicted the activists known as the East L.A. Thirteen for inciting the famous “blow outs” in which middle and high school students walked out of classes across East Los Angeles to protest underfunded and discriminatory schools. The second set of defendants, the Biltmore Six, were indicted following the protest and disruption of a speech by Governor Ronald Reagan at

the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles on charges of arson in connection to a small fire that broke out on the tenth floor of the hotel. While raising arguments based on a lack of evidence and on the grounds of freedom of speech, which López argues was the strongest defense of the East L.A. Thirteen, Acosta emphasized a third line of defense by seeking to prove discrimination on the part of the L.A. court system in grand jury selection. The legal team selected this defense because of its radical potential to demonstrate racism in the whole court system. Yet this strategy came with considerable risk as it was not the strongest defense of either set of defendants, each facing a series of charges including felony conspiracy to commit crimes, which carried a possible sentence of 45 years.⁴

The first challenge the defense faced in arguing for the discrimination charge was that people of Mexican descent were legally and officially designated as whites, even as they were not treated as such in practice, requiring Acosta to demonstrate that they were a separate social group. As Mary Romero explains, they drew on the 1954 case *Hernandez v. Texas* as a precedent for the legal prohibition of discrimination against Mexicans, but here “Mexicans” were defined

not as a racial group but as an identifiable class “within a community.” Thus, Acosta needed to provide evidence for both cases that Mexicans had been racialized and considered a distinct group in Los Angeles. A key witness was sociologist Joan Moore. Using census data, she demonstrated distinct socioeconomic patterns, shared cultural traditions, and low rates of intermarriage. However, her analysis was weakened by the fact that in 1960 and 1950 census data was not collected on “Mexicans” but rather on “White persons of Spanish surname.” (43)

Even after the subpoenaed judges admitted that they did think of Mexicans as a separate group, the defense was unable to prove any intent to discriminate against them. The judges simply selected people from their own social circles, which did not include Mexicans. Nevertheless, even though the discrimination defense failed, along with its large-scale indictment of the legal system, in time the defendants in both cases would be acquitted on the more standard legal grounds of lack of evidence and freedom of speech.

Acosta dramatized the two trials in his second book, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, but in this fictionalized account the discrimination charge succeeds and the court's systemic racism is exposed. This shows how much the lawyer-turned-author still believed in the strategy. As Michael Hames-García notes, "[i]n the space of his literary work, Acosta imagines the possibility for radical justice and substantive equality that the existing social order promises but does not deliver," but at the same time, "[t]his representation also strengthens his argument that even victory within the legal system would be insufficient for radical social change" (485). Acosta does not fetishize victory in the courtroom, seeking instead to expose the courts' systemic racism. While *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* directly represents the trials and Acosta's discrimination arguments, the earlier *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* can also be read as addressed to them, and in particular to the problem of first establishing the existence of Mexicans as a racialized group within the U.S. Romero quotes Acosta as arguing during the trial, "how in the world are they going to nominate us [for grand juries] since they don't know us? *We don't exist*," and goes on to note dryly that "Needless to say, Acosta failed to convince a court based on an intent-centered theory of racism that the 'nomination process in which Mexicans did not exist amounted to discrimination under the Fourteenth Amendment'" (220, emphasis added). But this paradox, of discrimination against that which doesn't exist, is precisely what *Brown Buffalo* is interested to expose. As we will see, it is less a question of uncovering the true, hidden Mexican, but in choosing to see in a different way: at the end of the novel, the protagonist Oscar will declare his identity to be a choice.

SEEING IN COLOR: WRITING THE BROWN BODY INTO VIEW

The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo begins on July 1, 1967, the day of the U.S. release of Procol Harum's single "A Whiter Shade of Pale." Oscar, a Mexican man living in San Francisco with only one other Mexican acquaintance, falls into an identity crisis.⁵ While hearing the song four times over the course of the day, he quits his job as a legal aid and goes on a road trip across the United States. Slowly coming to terms with his rural childhood and multi-layered identity, he eventually makes his way to Mexico, where his final humiliation is that he cannot speak Spanish. After being arrested and released from jail, he returns to the U.S. with a new sense of his identity as "a

Chicano by ancestry and a brown buffalo by choice,” and sets a new goal of leading a Chicano revolution (199).

From its opening line, the novel forges a connection between identity, color, and the body: “I stand naked before the mirror. Every morning of my life I have seen that brown belly from every angle” (11). The narrator sets up his reflection on his identity in explicitly visual terms, and the most salient aspect of this identity is the color brown. The demonstrative adjective “that” autonomizes the brown belly, which in the next sentence will be referred to only as “it,” introducing one of the chief concerns of this first chapter: the relationship between mind and body. In an internal dialogue with his psychiatrist, who argues that Oscar’s problems are caused by his mind, Oscar answers ““Oh don’t start on that. I’m *constipated!* Can’t you see? It’s a goddamned *physical* thing!”” (13, original emphasis). He defends himself against accusations of psychopathology by recourse to the body. And yet, on the previous page he has just rejected these physical causes as well: “At the age of twenty-one six (6) different doctors showed me pictures of what *they claimed* were holes in my stomach. . . It’s true I refused the advice of all six doctors. . . What value is a life without booze and Mexican food?” (12, original emphasis). Faced with a physical cause for his problems from medical doctors that would require him to forgo Mexican food, the narrator has turned to a psychiatrist. But when the psychiatrist in turn offers him a psychological cause, he returns to the physical.

This first chapter introduces the color motif through ongoing contrasts between the colorless world these experts inhabit and the range of colors associated with Oscar himself. On the first page he relates that, “With my large, peasant hands carefully on the rim of *white*, I descend to my knocked knees. I stare into the repository of all that is unacceptable and wait for the *green* bile, my *sunbaked* face where my big, *brown* ass will soon sit” (11-12, emphasis added). He is a colorful body, fluid, confronted with uncompromising, institutional white. His imagined psychiatrist, by contrast, is repeatedly associated with white and black, for example, “He fits a king size Kool to his ivory holder. . . and blows the white smoke in my direction. . . black-haired bastard” (13), with “his black leather couch” (14). The psychiatrist’s domain of black and white suggests at once a binary interpretive and moral logic, and a binary racial logic that renders invisible the true make-up of the U.S. It is telling that the narrator’s “three favorite men in the mirror

[who] have no answer for me” are Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson (12). Heroes of black and white film, they appeal to him precisely for the morally ambiguous characters that they play, drifting between the moral black and white into a “grey” area. And yet these anti-heroes cannot help him: even in the grey area there is no color, no place for the Chicano body.

Oscar rejects both medical and psychological hermeneutics, which privilege what cannot be seen with the naked eye. Their authority rests on their knowledge of an interiority that is hidden from the subject himself, accessed through Freudian analysis or radiation. He responds to the psychiatrist with the critical line “Can’t you see?” By directing all attention below the surface, they miss what is already visible, what is right in front of one’s face: color, the color of the body (13). Sure enough, once the narrative of his previous life unfolds, we learn that these stomach problems began in direct response to his harshest experience of racism as a teenager, when police power physically split him from his white girlfriend, Alice: “The convulsions down under began on that night. The wretched vomit, the gas laden belly formed within my pit when the chief of police asked me if I understood” (119-20). The distinctions in color do not originate in the narrator’s eye, of course, but have been implanted there by a racist power structure. But this structure will try to hide itself in turn, will remain invisible, and offers only two possible explanations for the narrator’s adult problems: physical or psychological. He rejects both narratives as attacks from which he must defend himself, because what he is rejecting is the power relationship with these white experts. The self that he is defending is specifically his Mexican self, defending his consumption of hot sauce and booze to the medical doctors, and defending the importance of racism from his psychiatrist who claims he “must be holding something [else] back,” something further inside that would explain his condition (13).

Acosta shows that the doctors cannot sense the main category of the situation—color or race—with the categories they use precisely because to *see* race here would implicate the white supremacist logic on which they depend. Because critics have not been attuned to Acosta’s interest in the senses, they have not commented the fact that the book as a whole, and the chapters which begin the narrative in San Francisco in particular, pay unusual attention to the color of objects. More than simple background, these objects appear highlighted in

often surprising colors. The world of the novel is one of red ink, dresses, lips, carpets, seas, dogs, blood, rings, tables; green pills, suds, walls, bile, telephones, telephone booths, machines, cars, weeds, hair, animals, rings, lips, mist, snot, drinks; blue suits, pills, eyes; purple offices, rugs, smocks, faces; pink offices, eyes; golden cigarette lighters, swords, trombones; yellow people; white faces, hands, legs, tennis shoes, casts; black cars, submarines, eyes, safes, ties; grey cities, hair; silver lips, hair; brown legs, stockings, cigars, pills, envelopes, teeth, coats, radios, mountains. These scenes of swirling colors recall the paisley fabric prints and psychedelic album covers and concert posters popular at the time. Oscar lives in a world where the innumerable compound color descriptions—readheaded, blackheaded, grey-haired—are not confined to people’s physical features but also move on to other available words, like the blackbean sauce from Wing Lee (13), Greensleaves the iguana and a song title (49), the narrator as Blackfoot Chief (102), or the Greyhound bus which he boards at the end headed for the Chicano city (199). In a typical passage, the narrator notices that “I am in my purple office, at my large, brown desk. . . tan filing cabinets. . . all under a flood of faded, flourescent white light. . . [wearing] the dark blue Macy’s suit. . . [when] the green telephone rings. . . that green machine. . . in the room with the purple rugs and the stained walnut walls” (27). Only rarely does the narrator neglect the color of an object, no matter how inconsequential. The reader comes to feel that it is not the objects that matter, but the colors themselves.

In creating this world of color, Acosta draws on the potential redistribution of the sensible available in contemporary cultural objects, their ability to shift the conventional way of perceiving and conceiving of the world. Color television gradually replaced greyscale technology in this period, and the 1966-1967 television schedule was the first in which all original prime-time network programming appeared in color. To anticipate the following section, the lines from “A Whiter Shade of Pale” quoted in the epigraph also capture Acosta’s interest in a radical instability of the visual field. The lyrics recount the speaker’s failure to see what the female voice nevertheless asserts is there: “She said there is no reason, and the truth is plain to see [. . .] And although my eyes were open, they might just as well have been closed.” The lines describe truth as something visual, though insight does not fail because a reason needs to be discovered or unmasked.

Rather the truth is plainly before both of them, but only visible to one observer and invisible to the other. The last line confirms the problem is not that the speaker needs to open his eyes, or the equivalent figure, to wake up—it is not a question of demystification. Much like Oscar’s psychiatrist, what the speaker misses is not something hidden from him, but something that he does not register in the visual field. The narrator’s insistence on displaying color in the most graphic and confrontational terms is then a hyperbolic gesture that keeps the color of the body and its meaning visible at all times. Sentences like “a belch of brown water gasps out of my waves of yellow lard. I smile serenely” (13) encode the liberatory potential of color as a release from the black and white logic of a white supremacist society. The grotesque corporeality of the description calls attention to itself as an intervention, as proof of the existence of the Chicano body that medical and legal discourse denies. It challenges the colorblind census and court that registered no racial distinction between “white” and “white with Spanish surname,” and so rendered racial discrimination against Chicanos invisible for the 1968 trials.

In the sensible world of the novel, by contrast, color is the central basis for making distinctions in terms of identity, and by extension for producing writing. For example, the narrator makes a point of distinguishing himself from Ginsberg, Kerouac, and the beatniks in general, in this way: “Not that I ever *identified* with those *purple*-faced winos, for Christ sake—I merely beat them at chess because I could drink more *Red* Mountain than they could” (18, only “identified” emphasized in original). He marks his non-identity with the beatniks in the color of their faces: purple, from their different reaction to liquor, which is itself linked to the color red. Indeed, their purple complexion perhaps results from the simple palette combination of adding the red (mountain) to their white (faces) and blue (blood, privilege), such that they are purple like a blended American flag.⁶ Color serves as the germinal basis of his identity and distinguishes the originality of his writing, a point emphasized by the added color term in the title of the novel itself, the autobiography of a *brown* buffalo. Consider this passage, the narrator’s first statement on his interest in writing:

[Looking] out the bay window with the *red* velvet drapes. . .
[y]ou can see the Golden Gate Bridge from my bed, that

orange-colored expanse with strings of *yellow* fog lights, the *green* water of the Pacific under its belly—it's taken up much of my time. I've written tons of shitty jibberish, love poems to old girlfriends that I never mail, angry letters to the *Chronicle* that remain unpublished, short stories that only bartenders appreciate, all inspired by that fantastic view. Me and my *white* Olympia have done this for years. (24, emphasis added)

The textual movement from the colorful world to the act of writing follows the narrative of inspiration. The colors in view have inspired all the writing, writing which here turns out to be a catalogue of colors, though his previous writing, which came out so poorly, has been filtered through a white typewriter. Indeed, Acosta had first written a more conventional autobiography years earlier, material that he repurposes in *Brown Buffalo* as a flashback to his childhood and adolescence, but it was only with the turn to the “gonzo style” on display in the present novel that he produced what he considered an original vision.

While the whiteness of the earlier writing signals its inferiority, this weakness derives from the *inspiration* at the center of the scene, an inhalation of the colors in the external world. What marks his better work, its “genius” as the narrator puts it, is the fact that it externalizes the colors of the body itself (24). His body and its color are his answer to the world, are art as truth. Vomit, the externalization of the internal body, is a recurring motif in the book, always with attention to color. He says that he has “puked wretched collages in the toilet bowl. . . The designs of curdled milk and scrambled eggs with ketchup are a sight, a work of genius. I ponder the fluid patterns of my rejections and consider the potential for art. Dali could do something with this, I'm sure. Perhaps I should write to him” (24-5). Oscar presents the grotesque body as high art in the tradition of the avant-garde. Staring into his multi-colored vomit inspires him to think of a Spanish-language artist, and to write, as this externalization of bodily color is itself his work. It tells, moreover, the truth about himself and the world. Gazing at the vomit he is caught up short: “But wait. ‘Good God, I didn't use any ketchup!. . . It's blood, God damn it! *Blood*, do you hear?’ I scream at my shrink. . . ‘Look at it, you Jew bastard and then tell me it's all in my head!’” (25). The color of the

vomit, the paint with which he created his masterpiece, is the truth, and the injunction to “look at it” is the message the novel delivers to the reader.

MUSIC AS REVELATION: AURAL VISIONS OF A NEW CHICANO IDENTITY POLITICS

The novel maintains self-referential moments like this from the opening scene before the mirror to the closing pages which describe the planning process for the book that the reader has just completed. One of the main self-referential devices is the recurring references to other cultural objects, above all rock music. In the passage quoted above, the narrator demands of the psychiatrist not only to “look at it,” but also “do you hear?” (25). While identity in the novel is above all a question of seeing color, the most transformative moments involve hearing as well, as if the counterpoint between what is seen and what is heard brings something new into view.

Hearing rock music often throws the narrator into a state of confusion, specifically a problem of perception. Driving to work after the imaginary argument with his psychiatrist, he turns on the radio to “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” which is “finally” a good song by the Beatles, although: “I can’t distinguish the words from the noise of the horns, the skidding brakes, the jangled nerves and my gas-laden belly. Is it a language problem, I ask myself. Or a hearing problem? And can anyone *understand* even if he does hear?” (18, original emphasis). He experiences a breakdown in perception: it is impossible to distinguish between the sound of the song, the sound of the external world, the effect of his mental state, and the effect of his physical body. In other words, he cannot separate two objective, external sources and two subjective, internal forces nor locate boundaries either between the object and the rest of the world, or between these two and his own internal state. This confusion introduces us to the power that rock music has in *Brown Buffalo* for redistributing the sensible, as he is unsure whether a sound is even being perceived by a hearer or not. From this fundamental problem he next moves to the question of language, which connects the sense of alienation to his Mexican identity. Oscar obviously understands English, but the word “understand” is italicized in the text: the question is what it means to understand. Here the voice of the psychiatrist immediately intervenes to ask the difference between hearing a song in English

and Spanish, to which he answers, “‘Fuck, I haven’t heard a song in Spanish since I was a kid.’ ‘Oh? You don’t like Mexican music?’ he stabs it to me” (19). The rock music disorients him, revealing how disoriented he already is due to his alienation from Mexican culture and his upbringing.

The following course of Oscar’s long day will develop this dimension of rock music further. After arriving at work and finding that his secretary has died, he decides to quit his job, without any plan. Before leaving, he writes a note to his partner which begins “I’m splitting” (33). At the level of the character, this wordplay has two meanings: he is leaving, going on the road, and his identity is fracturing as he is becoming aware of the split between his white middle class life and his Mexican lower class life. At the level of the novel, the narration will at this point split into two separate lines: his journey in the present and his experiences growing up. The novel says what it does and does what it says—this line is not in quotation marks, but is simply embedded written text—right down to the level of the individual word, as it is “splitting” that is here splitting into two levels of meaning.

Directly after these lines, chapter three opens with the narrator getting into his car and hearing “A Whiter Shade of Pale” for the first time, which we will later learn is the first time the song is ever broadcast in the U.S. This detail raises the moment beyond his individual experience even as it also serves to motivate why he is so thoroughly disoriented:

I turn on the radio full blast. An outrageous organ pumps out a spooky religious hymn. . . ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’? I’m caught up in a fog full of crazy pills. The man says something about blessed virgins and cartwheels cross the floor. Do I *hear* those words? I admit I cannot understand them. But is he really saying those things? (35, original emphasis)

As with the previous song, he distinguishes between hearing and understanding. Again, he is sure that he fails at understanding, while the more frightening question is whether hearing actually takes place. The strange and unsettling lyrics might be a hallucination, while the phrase “caught up in a fog full of crazy pills” links his drug use to the physical fog which he also comments on while driving. Just as he

cannot distinguish the boundary between the song and his consciousness, so the boundary between his consciousness and the environment is also in question. The passage represents a psychedelic experience as an altered mode of perception.

The narrator continues reflecting on the song, trying to make sense of it. He learns from the radio announcer that the song is performed by “a deep mystery called Procol Harum. The song moves me deeply. It reminds me of Luther’s ‘A Mighty Fortress is Our God.’ I can’t say I’m a religious person, but what with the Stelazine and the blood in the toilet, I guess you might say I feel spiritual at the present” (35). The repetition of the word deep, its transfer from the mystery of the group to his emotional state, indicates the continuity between the music and his own subjectivity. The last sentence here is highly ironic—as we will later learn, religion has been a central category in his identity struggle. Raised as a Catholic, the narrator later converted to Protestantism and became a missionary converting *indios* in Panama. That hearing “A Whiter Shade of Pale” reminds him of a hymn, and that he identifies it by name, points to his familiarity with religious texts, and connects to his conversion, as “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” was the battle hymn of Lutheran worshippers and armies during the Reformation (Julian 233).⁷ Though Oscar has by this time in his life rejected the Bible, he has not lost the sense of conviction. Hunter S. Thompson even writes of the real-life Acosta that “whenever things got tense or when he had to work close to the bone, he was always a missionary. And that was the governing instinct that ruined him for anything else. He was a preacher in the courtroom, a preacher at the typewriter and a flat-out awesome preacher when he cranked his head full of acid” (51-52). Indeed, in the closing lines of *Brown Buffalo* the narrator will compare himself to the figures of Moses and Martin Luther King as he imagines leading his people. His reaction to “A Whiter Shade of Pale” gives readers their first clue to Oscar’s evangelical side.

For Oscar, the power of this hymn builds as he continues to hear it over the course of the day. The fragmentary, paranoid lyrics contrast with the soothing baroque cathedral organ riff that the song is built around, and though they can be read as alluding to Chaucer’s “Miller’s Tale,” or Milton’s *L’Allegro*, what is important is their evocative, suggestive quality, rather than any clear denotation. He first hears the song when getting into his car, and by the next paragraph

realizes he has “been in a trance for some time” with “no memory” of driving across the Bay Bridge (36). His car radio cuts out as he drives through the tunnel at the end of the bridge only to come to life again with the song already playing for the second time: “On July the first, 1967, I still have to suffer along with the rest of the uninformed. And as I come out at the west end the radio is roaring ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’ once again” (36). Acosta tells us the date here for the first time, the date the single was released in the U.S. (Calderon 105). By the evening, Oscar’s breakdown continues to be linked to music as he hears the beginning of the Beatles’ song “Help” while walking past a bar: “Every single time I’ve heard that tune I’ve taken it as some message from God, a warning of things to come, a perfect description of my mashed-potato character” (51). While rock music potentially gives access to divine intention, it could also be a plot by unseen persecutors: “I wonder if those creeps played it intentionally” because of its psychic power over him (51). Immediately, “For the third time that day” he hears “A Whiter Shade of Pale” “coming at me” as he passes a record shop. The song’s repetition, the way it follows him through the city, heightens his paranoid sense that it contains a message addressed to him personally.

By the fourth listening later that night, the *Brown Buffalo* becomes completely disoriented, and has a transcendent experience of his Mexican-American childhood in poverty. His nemesis Ted Casey secretly slips mescaline into his drink and then plays the new record just as the drug takes effect, prompting a further series of religious hallucinations. Casey asks him about his previous experience with psychedelics: “I can’t answer him. I’m an innocent, brown-eyed child of the sun. Just a peach-picker’s boy from the West Side. Riverbank. My father’s a janitor with only a third-grade education and my mother makes tortillas at 5:00 A.M. before she goes to the cannery” (54). This is a surprising moment in the narrative, which up to this point has been relating a day in the life of a San Francisco lawyer. While the narrator has already described his racial and class anxieties, his feelings of inferiority with respect to his fellow lawyers, this has been squarely within the urban milieu of San Francisco. In contrast to the neurotic guilt of his everyday life which the novel links to an enigmatic yet demanding Christian God, this pastoral vision endows him with a mystical and racialized innocence. A moment of escape from the complication and decadence of the city embodied by the Jewish

psychoanalyst stereotype, the narrative still presents Oscar's memory trip with characteristic irony: the reader cannot know at this point whether it represents a real memory or another hallucination. In fact, his psychedelic trip evoked an image from his actual childhood, and his narrative on the road will be equal parts seeking the future and reflecting on his transformation from "peach-picker's boy" to urban lawyer. The rupture contained in this scene thus spills over the structure of the novel from this point forward, until the childhood remembrance catches up to the present and the two narrative lines are brought into an emergent harmony.

The narrator's journey of reconceptualizing his identity begins with a visual hallucination in response to an aural experience of music. In this scene, with the aid of a psychedelic drug, this perceptual bleed carries over into the visual and audible world around him: "I begin to fade into the orange rugs as the foghorns call out for more." The lyric "But the crowd called out for more" from "A Whiter Shade of Pale" mixes with the foghorn, again softening the line between the sound of the music and the sights and sounds of his ambient environment. The auditory blurring blends with visual blurring, so that his body melts into his immediate environment, the rug, which is again explicitly colored.

PSYCHEDELIC MUSIC AS A DISCOURSE ON WHITENESS

"A Whiter Shade of Pale" thus appears at the center of Oscar's identity crisis, his decision to leave San Francisco, and opens the novel's second, cross-cutting narrative line depicting his childhood, three connotations of his early line "I'm splitting" (31). The song achieves these effects partly due to its disorienting, religious sound—yet the specific reorientation to explore his racial identity is signaled by its lyrics. The clearest words in the song are the title line, which concerns the whiteness of a face and evokes Oscar's shifting racial identity. He is first Mexican among Mexicans, then Mexican among/as white(s), then a Chicano, and finally also a brown buffalo. His shock in hearing the song is the shock of self-recognition: living immersed in a white culture, he is the one who has turned a whiter shade, and his journey and goal from here on will be to reverse this whitening process. Furthermore, the line sets up an ambiguous relationship between "white" and "pale," introducing a difference within the same. In the terms of the census and the court it is the difference between "white

with Spanish surname,” and just “white,” the whiter shade of pale. Acosta wants to emphasize and expand this difference, to redistribute the sense of color and by extension to see and name two racial categories in this visual field rather than one. He titles his autobiography with a similarly ambiguous color doubling, “a brown buffalo,” again introducing a difference into the same: “I am a Chicano by ancestry and a brown buffalo by choice” (199). The doubling insists on identifying (with) the brownness of the buffalo as a political act.

While critics of Acosta maintain that rock music is one of the countercultural elements that sets him apart from true Chicano writers, this song has been covered by dozens of Latin American groups and singers from 1967 to the present, attesting to its popularity among Spanish-speaking audiences. Yet these covers largely elide the ambiguity of whiteness that Acosta identifies in the original. Almost always given the title “Con su blanca palidez,” they change the rest of the lyrics to a straightforward lament for a beloved with a white face. Typical is the first Spanish-language version, by the Spanish group Los Pop Tops, which appeared only a few months after the release of the original, and is in the form of a nocturne. Whereas in Procol Harum’s original, the face begins as “ghostly” and then becomes even less lifelike in its paleness, in Los Pop Tops’ version, the face is remembered fondly:

Entre mis sueños te veo, a mi lado otra vez
 Y tu rostro tan sereno, con su blanca palidez
 [Between my dreams I see you, next to me again
 And your face so serene, with its white paleness.]

This version straightforwardly values whiteness, as does the version from the next year by the Venezuelan group Los Impala, and many later Spanish-language recordings use the lyrics from either of these two early recordings. A few years later, however, Los Pop Tops appeared on the music and comedy television series “360 grados de torno a . . .” where their performance of “Con su blanca palidez” ironically foregrounds whiteness as race.⁸ The segment features a troupe of mimes, their faces painted white, performing stylized, ballet-like movements around the group’s black Trinidadian lead singer, Phil Trim, who relates to them with bemusement. Trim sings while walking slowly past a line of mimes holding large black-and-white portraits of

entertainment figures such as Frank Sinatra and Charlie Chaplin, and while painting black tears onto a painted white face. The surrealist tableau parodies the earnest tone of the song as well as its celebration of whiteness. This performance aired in January 1973, less than a year after the publication of *Brown Buffalo*, and over five years removed from the summer of love.

An exception to the general rule of Spanish-language cover versions as love songs is José Feliciano's version released in 1968,⁹ which, like Acosta's novel, emphasizes the religious feel of the song. Feliciano draws on Los Pop Tops' longing for the beloved, but his lyrics remain ambiguous until the final chorus where it becomes clear that it is actually God who has turned away his shining white face. Feliciano references their imagery, but with a shift from darkness as nocturne to darkness as alienation from the divine. For example, Los Pop Tops' first line opens with *el cielo*, the sky, as romantic nature imagery, "Caminos en el cielo, misterios en el mar," [Roads in the sky, mysteries in the sea]. Feliciano places *cielo* in the same position, at the end of the first phrase, but doubles it to play on the word's two meanings: "El cielo ya no es cielo, ni el sol no brilla mas" [The sky is no longer heaven—even the sun no longer shines]. This doubling of *el cielo* that introduces a second meaning echoes the double "white paleness." Feliciano's second verse begins with the pain of losing one's faith, and develops a motif of repeat words in each of the last four lines:

Dolor de fe vencida, es que su blanca palidez
 y en nuestra despedida, otra vida que se fue
 es, es en vano tanto anhelo, que ni el cielo escuchará
 y mis ojos ya, ya, ya vacíos, van, van rodando sin cesar.
 Oye Dios mío, Señor, Señor y Juez, yo quiero verlo cerca mío
 otra, otra vez muy cerca mío, con su blanca palidez.

Both hearing and seeing break down as the connection is lost. Feliciano borrows the translation "con su blanca palidez" from Los Pop Tops to render "a whiter shade of pale," but plays on the ambiguity of the word "su," a pronoun used for both second and third person, both female and male. In the previous verse it seemed to mean, as in the earlier song, the female third-person possessive, the face of the beloved. By this last verse *su* can only be the formal second person, and male, as the speaker pleads with God to hear him.

Furthermore, the instability of vision in Procol Harum's original is given greater poignancy when Feliciano, who is blind, sings "And my eyes already, already, already vacant, go, go rolling with no end." The stuttering repetition of "ya," (*already*), which breaks the steady hymn-like rhythm of the song, brings home the despair of being left ever further from a God who has withdrawn his face. His "ojos vacíos," literally "empty eyes" that are rolling echoes Acosta's scene with the Owl just after hearing "A Whiter Shade of Pale" for the last time, when "my eyeballs fall into my cognac" (62). Feliciano's cry to see God's face near his own, with its white paleness, repeats before the song ends. Where other interpretations maintain the conventions of typical pop and rock music, he sees in this song a meditation on alienation from truth. Feliciano, like Acosta a bicultural U.S. citizen, does not follow the standard pop format, nor the white standard of beauty implied in the other Spanish-language translations. Instead, he plays on the lyrical ambiguities connecting romantic love and the search for the divine. Acosta follows the singer's lead five years later by putting "A Whiter Shade of Pale" at the center of his crisis of faith in the world around him and approaching truth as a question of what is visible and invisible.

As we have seen, the song occupies such a central position in *Brown Buffalo* because it both performs a redistribution of the sensible, and figures whiteness as unstable. In the song itself hearing causes the visual change, and specifically it is hearing a "tale":

And so it was that later, as the miller told his tale,
That her face at first just ghostly, turned a whiter
shade of pale.

The song lyric invests narrative with the power to change the color of one's face, and also highlights the song's temporality. The earlier disorienting events have created the conditions in which hearing the tale can have such an effect. Toward the end of *Brown Buffalo* the two split narrative lines resolve, as recovered childhood memory catches up to the present and the reader more fully understands Oscar's experience. At this point there is another change, as constructing a complete narrative of his past allows Oscar to think differently about his identity for the future. After the flashbacks stop, he goes marauding with Karl King (Hunter S. Thompson) on a final assault against

hypocritical white counterculture, donning a black mask to disrupt a love-in. The soundtrack at the party is “The Masked Marauder,” in another example of a self-referential, paranoid soundtrack that responds to and guides Oscar’s thoughts and actions. This scene with Acosta’s real-life writing companion further thematizes the power of technological recording and playback as Oscar feels overwhelmed by the volume of recording devices in Karl King’s house.

After his symbolic rejection of the counterculture, Oscar takes off the mask and crosses the border in search of his lost roots in Mexico. He finds them in the faces he encounters: “All the faces are brown, tinged with brown, lightly brown, the feeling of brown” (185). The narrator’s obsession with color over the course of the book has finally found what it is looking for, and he cannot stop looking at it. The color brown is already everywhere around him, but he keeps repeating it in this sentence, further doubling it, quadrupling it, perpetuating it. Moreover, in keeping with the synesthesia of the drug scenes, brown exceeds the visual field to become a feeling and even a world.

But this world of brown will not be a perfect fit for him either, as it highlights another contradiction in his identity: he does not speak Spanish. This final crisis arises in the form of humiliation before two Mexican women, one in a bar and one in a courtroom. At the bar he is sorely disappointed to hear Jefferson Airplane’s “White Rabbit,” which reminds him of his life back in San Francisco. The multiple references to Lewis Carroll—such as his teenage white girlfriend named Alice—resonate with, or perhaps ironize, the novel’s opening scene before the looking glass and his wondrous, ridiculous adventure. Again, a psychedelic rock song about whiteness accompanies a crisis of racial identity: “With the bass drum pounding into my brain, I ordered a tequila for a quarter and soon I had a woman with red hair and peach skin in a purple mini-skirt asking me, ‘*Me compra una copa?*’” (189). As she has light skin and red hair, Oscar decides she must be an American girl “fak[ing]” Spanish. The woman has the same experience of disjunction between sound and vision. When he asks in English to buy her a drink, she responds:

“Oye, *que dice este indio?*. . . *Y este, no me digas que no es Mexicano?*” The redhaired lady with peach skin taunted me. In Panama I had met some light-skinned Costa Rican missionaries and in Riverbank we knew an Oscar Sandoval

who had freckles and red hair. But I had always imagined the Mexican as a dark-skinned person, a brown buffalo. . . For God's sake, she knew I was *mexicano* and yet I couldn't even offer her a drink in our language! (189)

Knowing a light-skinned Mexican Oscar, his whiter double, was not enough. Only after the journey, accompanied by music, can he see that there are Mexicans of every "shade of pale," from "white" to "brown" to "black." He had a premonition when Alice ended up marrying an Italian whose skin was darker than his own, and he had to conclude that her step-father "was just down on Mexicans, period," that is, Mexicans of any color (130). This trip to Mexico shows him that the perception of color, the way the sensible is distributed, is culturally constructed, as two characters face each other in the mirror, one who looks "brown" but sounds "white," the other who looks "white" but sounds "brown."

While many authors have explored the complications of color and language in Chicano identity, and their implications for race and culture, Acosta is unique in attempting to break these experiences down into a flow of visual and auditory sense experiences. Defending the Biltmore Six and the East L.A. Thirteen in 1968, he sought to prove that "Mexicans" were subject to racial discrimination even though the U.S. census hid this discrimination by categorizing them as a subset of whites. By engaging with psychedelic music, and visual and auditory hallucinations, *Brown Buffalo* explores how recognizing a new racial identity requires a new vision of color, and suggests that this redistribution of the sensible took place within a context of cultural and technological transformations such as color television and new recording studio effects. Within this context, Acosta selects music from the summer of love whose lyrics already invoke the color white in enigmatic ways. The protagonist always experiences these songs as unsettling and uncanny: hearing "A Whiter Shade of Pale" with a hip crowd in San Francisco, he imagines himself back as an *indio* in a rural area, while hearing "White Rabbit" in Mexico, where he has thought to escape America, he imagines himself right back in San Francisco. The musical allusions to color, to race, always take him elsewhere, to a disjunction, suggesting that his identity in the moment is doubled by another identity in another place and at another time. Psychedelic rock works for these scenes because it is already invested

formally in distancing effects and in suggesting multiple overlapping realities. Acosta bends that form in service of the pressing political issue of Chicanos identity in relation to the U.S. and Mexico. As he puts it on the last page: “My *single* mistake has been to seek an identity with any *one* person or nation or with any part of history” (199, emphasis added). As at other points in the novel, the phrase “my single mistake,” condenses the point, that his singularity was the mistake. This mistaken singularity must be corrected by doubling meanings and splitting identities and narratives, a project *Brown Buffalo* takes up with frenetic, compulsive energy.¹⁰

Notes

1. By ugliness of writing I refer, of course, to the book’s consistent recourse to misogyny, stereotypes, and ethnic and homophobic slurs. See most recently Carrasquillo. Aldama makes cautious attempts to defend these elements as self-consciously satirical. On Acosta’s weight not fitting the image of the undernourished Chicano nation, see Chamberlain.

2. I follow Ontiveros and others in using “counterculture” in its original singular form to designate a particular, mostly white, 1960s cultural and political phenomenon, rather than in the sense of sub-cultures as multiple “countercultures.” Ontiveros identifies Acosta on the “periphery” of the counterculture so defined (24).

3. In *Countering the Counterculture*, for example, Martínez reads the road trip as one of several figures of mobility important to Mexican American politics at the time, including the migrant, the *movimiento*, and finally a *movida*, “a Chicano colloquialism meaning a slick move” through which Acosta “announces a break with el movimiento and a Chicano identity that is too narrow” (179).

4. In fact, because three defendants were named in both cases, they faced life sentences in the second case (Romero 217).

5. I use Oscar to refer to the character, and Acosta, the author.

6. Ginsberg’s Jewish heritage does not appear to trouble Acosta’s vision, which at this point in the novel is based on skin color. As we saw during Oscar’s anti-semitic rant against his psychiatrist, the latter is consistently associated with black and white in contrast to Oscar’s own color.

7. Perhaps coincidentally, this song is also referenced in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, which is again about the invisibility of the racialized minority.

8. An excerpt from the show showing this performance of “Con su blanca palidez” can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yj-miDYxEZY>.

The entire episode with Los Pop Tops is available at <http://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/programas-y-concursos-en-el-archivo-de-rtve/gran-especial-720-grados-torno-nati-mistral-pop-tops/3450735/>.

9. As with many recording artists of the period, Feliciano's albums were released in different editions for different markets. "Con su blanca palidez" appeared on some editions of the 1968 album *La Copa Rota*, but not the edition that was later transferred to compact disc. Today the song is most easily accessible on YouTube.

10. I would like to thank Héctor Calderón for his comments on an early version of this essay.

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