

Oscar Zeta Acosta and Nепantla: The Conceptual In-between

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***Abstract:** In this paper the concept of nepantla, which means ‘torn between ways’ in Nahuatl, the Aztec language, is applied to a reading of Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* in order to determine how in-betweenness is represented and constructed in the novel. Based on Gloria Anzaldúa’s theoretical work, the resulting reading into nepantla becomes useful in determining how the protagonist, Oscar, does not narrate his experiences from a static position that can be easily categorized, but rather as a multiplicity in which he is located in a conceptual space in-between multiple categories. As such, applying nepantla to a text broadens the understanding and applicability of non-diachronic identity formations, particularly in contrast to the term *mestizaje*. Nearly every character in the novel is described in terms of his or her ethnicity, often derogatorily, including the narrator, which, understood as satire, goes beyond the nationalism prevalent in the Chicano Movement. Understood as a religious pilgrimage, the narration develops from a Mexican American Catholic upbringing, to Baptist Anglo Protestantism and ultimately into a form of Aztec religious coding that is in-between inherited and constructed identity categories and framed as a creative nepantlera space and as a choice.*

Keywords: nepantla, in-betweenness, multiplicity, Chicano/a, Oscar Zeta Acosta

Introduction

Oscar Zeta Acosta’s novel *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* is a carnivalesque satire marked by mayhem, mockery and irreverence. The novel presents a largely unlikable yet at times vulnerable narrator that performs a sequence of acts—such as hallucinating at a fancy restaurant and subsequently ‘blacking out’ and continuing to perform, unable to remember it

later—that cause the reader to cringe.¹ The novel is calibrated to shock and cause disgust and works to explode, invert, or simply mock the ideologies that make American society appear as cohesive in the middle part of the 20th century, among others the stability of ethnic and religious categories. Scholars interested in Chicano/a² culture have studied the novel because it presents a symbolic moment at a nexus of historical, social, cultural, political and economic change occurring at that time. Both symbolically and overtly the novel, understood as a critique through multi-layered textual meaning utilizing satire, irony and humor, offers the researcher a rich source by which to study the issues, obsessions, contradictions, fears, and hopes of one Chicano/a individual observing and creating his place in society.

Autobiography was published in 1972, a period when the Chicano Movement was coming to an end and scholars had begun deconstructing the concept of Chicano/a within the Chicano Movement in a way that highlighted the multiplicity of the community by taking into account internal differences, especially in areas such as gender, class, language, region and sexuality. My intent is to add to this body of work by applying a reading of Gloria Anzaldúa's theoretical concept of nepantla as an identity formation framework (*Borderlands; Bridge*) to the novel at hand. Nepantla means 'torn between ways' in Nahuatl, the Aztec language, and is a created and creative space, and instead of a formulation in which deconstructed identity categories are bridged, it is defined by a multiplicity where different significances ascribed to and taken up by individuals can exist free-floatingly as opposed to a hierarchical, linear order. Applying nepantla highlights how *Autobiography* anticipates many contemporary debates to do with Chicano/a identity formation, namely the destabilization and continual revision of ethnic, religious, national and other categories in a complex theoretical process that has no endpoint.

Anzaldúa and other Chicana theorists (Keating *Entre Mundos*; Pérez *Chicana Art*; Medina) have stressed two interrelated aspects of nepantla: the

1 The author wishes to thank Maja Povrzanovic Frykman, PhD, Karin Sarsenov, PhD and the journal's reviewers for their very helpful insights.

2 The term *Chicano/a* was first used prominently during the so-called Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and the early 1970s and generally connotes a person of Mexican heritage and ethnicity that grew up in the United States. 'Mexican American' and 'Chicano/a' are often used broadly and interchangeably, as illustrated by the research field Chicano Studies. Here, I use 'Mexican American' for a more technical ethnic category in the manner of a government census report and 'Chicano/a' to imply a person that has self-identified with that term.

instability of identity categories through movement betwixt and between identity categories as well as a transformative ethics of change, formulated by Anzaldúa as ‘spiritual activism’ (*Bridge* 558). Acknowledging the problematic nature of discussing ‘spirituality’ in a scientific context,³ it is nevertheless of central concern to the concept of nepantla, and its emphasis can be understood as a manner by which to deconstruct the “spiritual/material, inner/outer, individual/collective dimensions of life [that are] parts of a larger whole, joined in a complex, interwoven pattern” (Keating ‘Universe’ 54). In terms of a nepantla identify formation framework, spirituality can be taken as the “inner work” (Anzaldúa and Keating *Bridge*) that takes place when a subject listens to the voice inside him- or herself contemplatively (Anzaldúa ‘Zurdo’ 195). This should lead to empowerment to “create actual change in the world” (Anzaldúa ‘Zurdo’ 195), hence joining a subject’s ‘inner’ development with that of the community, or, as Lara Medina succinctly puts it: “spirituality is fundamentally about being in relationship” (167). In line with Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of nepantla, spirituality can manifest itself in many forms and might consist of emotions, a connection with the world after death, psychic spaces,⁴ the supernatural,⁵ and a connection to indigenous cultures (Keating ‘Placticando’ 142), all of which Oscar encounters in *Autobiography*. Acosta’s spirituality remains, however, on a vulgar level at variance with the engaged conceptualization put forward by Chicana theorists (Carrasquillo 80, 82; Anzaldúa and Keating *Bridge*; Keating *Entre Mundos* 6-7; Pérez *Chicana Art* 30-32; Medina 170-171).

Indeed, Acosta’s ‘inner work’, as presented through Oscar’s narrative voice, which often takes the form of Gonzo exaggeration and subjectivity in a “frenzied style of attacking from a constantly shifting, counter-cultural vantage point” (Wright 623), is anomalous in a Chicana theoretical context. To take one example, his handling of indigenous cultures is superficial and in line with the essentialisms found in the Chicano Movement.⁶ In spite

3 Academics are trained in rational thought, logical reasoning and empirical demonstrations and, as a result, they often avoid discussing the central role of spirituality in Anzaldúa’s oeuvre; AnaLouise Keating takes up this question specifically (‘Universe’). For more on the marginalization of spirituality in the academic context: Pérez ‘Spirit Glyphs’ 37-38.

4 James Hillman describes the ‘psychic’ as a way to experience fantasy in all realities and fantasy as a basic reality (23; Pérez connects Hillman’s insight to Anzaldúa, *Chicana Art* 32).

5 Drugs are not, strictly speaking, ‘supernatural’ but they can sometimes give the person who has consumed them the appearance of being so, especially LSD; see, for example, Acosta *Autobiography* 38-42; 159-163).

6 Other examples include gender and treatment of homosexuals as well as the topics that will be concentrated on below: ethnicity and religion. Wright, in the essay quoted here, goes on to show that Hunter S.

of this, as will be elaborated below, if taken as satire, Acosta's vulgar formulations of ethnic, religious and other categories should be understood as a way of mocking the categories' essentialist nature, although he then fails to formulate a constructive liberatory alternative to the essentialisms he mocks and sometimes perpetuates despite the satirical mode.⁷ In this qualified capacity, Oscar's movement betwixt and between categories does succeed in destabilizing the categories' ideological power and he manages to show the shallowness of such delineations for the protagonist Oscar. In the tradition of satire, *Autobiography* highlights some of the problems in Chicano/a and US culture, which Acosta does by presenting the realities of Chicano/a and US identity as syncretic and complex (Carrasquillo 92) through the creative act of writing in interaction with the community.

By applying nepantla to Acosta's novel, it is possible to determine to what extent the narrator enters a conceptualized in-between space via his movement between categories, which can be understood to be beyond the scope of diachronic social relationships as formulated in the concept *mestizaje*. Mestizaje, originally an ethnic category, has been framed as a bridge that spans identity categories in order to create a culture of chosen, as well as imposed, identities and experiences (see Anzaldúa *Borderlands*). If mestizaje is a bridge, nepantla is the "unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries" between bridges that is characterized by movement or a "constant state of displacement" (Anzaldúa and Keating *Bridge* 1). The main research objective of this paper is to discern to what extent, and how, an in-between nepantlera space is represented in *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*. Through this example it should become clear that nepantla is of principle consequence for a number of fields—including American Studies, Literary Studies, Critical Theory, Ethnography and Migration Studies—or indeed for better understanding any situation in which identities, cultures and ideologies meet and borders,

Thompson, the founder of Gonzo Journalism and a friend/colleague of Acosta, makes the point that mixing journalism (or in Acosta's case autobiography) with fiction is a method of reporting that is "based on William Faulkner's idea that the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism [...]" (*The Great Shark Hunt* 106; quoted from Wright 624). Though Acosta's use of satire and elements of Gonzo journalism is stylistically very different from what Chicana theorists (mentioned above) have had in mind, both methods are attempting to reshape America's political (broadly speaking) landscape (Wright 623), in line with Anzaldúa's idea of 'spiritual activism'.

7 As Michael Hames-García has pointed out, "Acosta seems to have failed to find ways to connect oppressions and identities without assuming false or superficial commonalities or re-inscribing pre-existing inequalities" ('Gonzo' 478).

both physical and figurative, are crossed.

Before continuing with the presentation and analysis of Acosta's novel, the text's genre must be clarified. The term 'autobiography' can be misleading and some, including Acosta's biographer, Ian Stavans, have assumed a more or less straightforward correlation between *Autobiography* and historical events (Walker 147; Hames-García *Fugitive* 267; Mendoza 80). Critical work has shown that the book should be treated as a destabilized autobiography that satirizes the autobiography as a genre dominated by Western authors that, according to Frederick Luis Aldama, "spreads thick veneers over its manipulation of detail to naturalize as 'fact' the centrality of its protagonist's experience and subjectivity" (63-64).⁸ Highlighting the fictionality of the book, I refer to it as a novel. Corresponding to the previous point, I have borrowed Michael Hames-García's method of referring to the real-life, historical author as Acosta and his narrating protagonist as Oscar.

Autobiography, Chicano/as and El Plan

The scope of *Autobiography* is religious, from crisis to redemption (Calderón 98-99). It opens on 1 July 1967, when Oscar is 33 years old, the age of Christ crucified. He is described as fat (i.e. a Brown Buffalo), has ulcers, vomits blood, is depressed and realizes his position as a lawyer does not fulfill him. He abruptly throws his bar diploma into the rubbish bin and departs on a road trip in search of his past (Acosta 71). The novel morphs into a road narrative in which Oscar, through a series of flashbacks, narrates episodes in which a number of his powerful identity markers changed. As a child Oscar is a devout Mexican American Catholic but, as a young man, he converts to the Baptist Church in an act of assimilation with the Anglo status quo. Although earnest to the point of obsession, he later deconverts from the Baptist Church and, after a suicide attempt in New Orleans, becomes a lawyer. He works at the Legal Aid Society, a federal program that offers poor Americans free legal services. Reaching a crisis point, which brings the reader back to the opening of the novel, Oscar quits his job and sets out on a pilgrimage. After numerous misadventures, the novel ends with Oscar's explicit description of himself as being in-between the categories that the novel has relentlessly built up and, in turn, dismantled, which acts as a denouement to Acosta's central theme, which, in the words

8 A popular example in American Literature is Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*.

of Laura Pérez, could be said to be “the postconquest condition of cultural fragmentation and social intermediacy” (*Chicana Art* 30).⁹ Mexican American Catholicism and the Anglo Protestant status quo have failed to fulfill him and the pilgrimage ends in nepantlera transcendence that Oscar frames in religious terms, which is to say a position of his own creation that is necessarily influenced by the Chicano Movement, Anglo society, Mexico, Catholicism, Protestantism, Aztec or indigenous religions, and other aspects but not necessarily part of any of them.

The novel’s historical context is the Chicano Movement, which was closely related to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. One version of it was codified by a diverse group of Chicano/a leaders in a manifesto named *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* in 1969. The manifesto’s goal was to bring all Chicano/as together “with one heart and one mind” employing a form of nationalism that “transcends all religious, political, class and economic factors and boundaries”. Chicano/a leaders utilized the concept of “La Raza”, or ‘the Race’ in nationalistic terms. For example, *El Plan* states that “sangre” (blood) is “our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny”, blending biology with politics. However, they did so to improve the living conditions of Mexican Americans.¹⁰ Chicano/a artists pictured Aztec warriors with their plumed headgear in a way that authenticated the movement through “artistic and liberatory truth [found] in highly idealized visions of an authentic indigenous past” (Hames-García ‘Gonzo’ 466). A heterogeneous group of activists and individuals actively created a hyper-masculinized, heterosexual, and homogenous Chicano/a identity to act in opposition to the Anglo, “gringo”, or “foreign Europeans” (*El Plan*). This oppositional identity was partly created through the Chicano Movement but it was also, previous to the movement, thrust upon those that were coded as ethnically Mexican American because of ideological and social differences that include religion (Catholic), language (Spanish), darker complexion, culinary habits (spicy foods), socio-economic status (usually poorer),

9 ‘Conquest’ could refer to the conquest of the Americas by the Spanish, the conquest by the USA of what is now the Southwestern United States from Mexico (see below), or the conquest of one religious denomination, ethnicity, gender or sexuality over another.

10 Despite such radically essentialized ideas of race, Chicano/a cultural nationalism did also bring about beneficiary change to the Mexican American community. Ellie D. Hernández writes that cultural nationalism was also a “positive and emancipatory narrative that gave rise to a new identity and political process” for Mexican Americans, and can be viewed as a “strategy of decolonization by ethnic minorities” (11).

and also institutions, such as the judicial system.¹¹ The Chicano Movement consolidated this position as Other and, instead of accepting all social differences as negative, utilized the positioning to achieve a more positive self-identity and social situation through activism. This is illustrated by the word ‘Chicano’ itself, which originally had a negative resonance in the Southwestern U.S. within the Mexican American community, implying a person of dubious character and/or a recent immigrant of lower economic class (Peñalosa 18). However, it was then appropriated by the movement and used with pride.

In line with Benedict Anderson’s idea of ‘imagined communities’, there is no essential Mexico or people that are essentially Mexican or Mexican American. These concepts become real, however, through the imagination and are influenced by languages, cultures, religions, traditions and so on, that historically create a national identity. Through these elements, and the manner in which they are presented in narratives, the way a nationality is imagined can change. For Chicano/as, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* was an act of creating (i.e. changing) nationality through the imagination, built on specific cultural choices.

Anzaldúa and Nepantla

Chicano/a theorists have used Anzaldúa’s seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera* to articulate not only a hybrid place to talk *about*, but also a “hybrid thinking-space” from where to think *from* with multiple voices (Mignolo xiii).¹² The importance of Anzaldúa’s conceptual framework can hardly be overstated. However, it was Anzaldúa herself (shortly before she died) that re-assessed her own stance and began the work of developing beyond the diachroneity and exclusiveness of the conceptualization of mestizaje and into what she termed a nepantlera consciousness.¹³ She did this

11 The *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo* ended the Mexican-American War (1846-48) and stipulated that Mexican citizens could remain in the areas annexed to the United States (California, Nevada, Utah, large areas of Arizona and Texas, half of New Mexico and parts of Wyoming and Colorado) and become citizens if they so chose. However, property rights for Mexicans were often not honored by U.S. courts in accordance to the Treaty (Gonzales 86). María Ruiz de Burton illustrates this in the novel *The Squatter and the Don*.

12 Such theoreticians are many, because *Borderlands/La Frontera* is a paradigm-setting work. To mention but a few in my field: Carrasco and Sagarena; León; Delgadillo; Pérez.

13 This ‘shift’ becomes evident by comparing *Borderlands*, published in 1987, to Anzaldúa’s essay ‘now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner work, public acts’ from 2002 (*Bridges*). For an overview of Anzaldúa’s self-critique, see Koegeler-Abdi.

in two ways. Firstly, she opened up cultural and political activism to other ethnicities, geographic spaces and genders and secondly, instead of framing the conceptual space as a bridge between two or more identifying categories (mestizaje), she described nepantlera consciousness as a space in-between those categories. Anzaldúa writes that it is “the site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures” (*Bridge* 548). It is described as a willing step to enter this in-between state, with an emphasis on the creative performance of reconstructed identities. Nepantla is, in other words, a more ambiguous, shifting, changeable and indeed painful space that has to be continually re-assessed, re-created, and re-performed.

In defining a nepantlera framework and ways in which nepantla might be applied to a literary reading, it is useful to note that many commentaries on Anzaldúa’s work tend to emphasize certain aspects of her framework. Theresa Delgadillo, like the Chicana theorists mentioned above, utilizes nepantla to stress the spiritual side of mestiza consciousness, which is important as a “sustained multimodal and self-reflexive critique of oppression” but also as a “creative and engaged participation in shaping life that honors the sacred” (1). She also notes Anzaldúa’s development from a mestiza to a more inclusive nepantlera stance (Delgadillo 9) while emphasizing the latter’s dynamism as active engagement with the process of spiritual mestizaje, which is theorized as a “historical and contemporary methodology of renewal” (Delgadillo 8). David Carrasco and Roberto Lint Sagarena take up Anzaldúa’s concept of borderlands in terms of a shamanic space, which they call *loca-centric*, in which “wildly rereading and reinventing the traditions in ways that turn misery and oppression into creative insights and new words” brings about mestiza consciousness (238). They describe Anzaldúa’s work as a conceptual space in which random, accidental connections can be made, which captures the non-linear, non-hierarchical mode of nepantla.¹⁴

It is also similar to Luis D. León’s conception of “religious poetics”, which he describes as a “strategy of performed and narrated religious discourse, *tactics*, and strategies” by which “culturally derived meanings” are

14 They do not, however, refer to the term ‘nepantla’. This illustrates how the concepts ‘mestizaje’, ‘borderlands’ and ‘nepantla’ can overlap and are sometimes used interchangeably, which indicates that further delineation is necessary. Anzaldúa comments on this in an interview (Keating ‘Placticando’ 142).

rearranged to change and reinvent the definition of symbols (4, emphasis in original). León links religious poetics to nepantla as well as to Nietzsche's concept of the transvaluation of morals, "wherein ethics, values, and norms are mutated, inverted, and ultimately transformed to favor the disempowered" (4). By being in-between various categories and influenced by different social discourses, the Chicano/a, in this case, creates meaning through transculturation, or the merging of various cultural possibilities (Carrasco 'Hurricane' 361). The result is a distinct in-between culture discernable through Chicano/a texts, which contributes to broadening the register of imaginable potentialities in theories of identity construction. What these texts and others have in common is the emphasis on the creative force of nepantla (or nepantla-like conceptualizations).

Anzaldúa sets out a preliminary framework for nepantla and, by applying it to *Autobiography*, insights into how a nepantlera space is represented and created become clearer. Anzaldúa's later stance (in 'now let us shift...') is closer to Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity, because the deconstructed self, which is in turn reconstructed inwardly, must be projected outwardly to a real and shifting society (Butler 272; Koegeler-Abdi 81). The self as a performance is an important theme in *Autobiography*. As will be discussed in relation to the novel below, Oscar performs ethnicity and religion and changes modes continually. Performativity often leads to failure, which Koegeler-Abdi links to Butler's ideas of subjectivization, where identity construction is repeatedly forced back into an in-between state (81) and Oscar also moves from one 'failed' persona to another. Through failures, Acosta calls attention to the instability of identity categorization. His personas crash parties and a car, have blackouts and bad trips, attempt suicide, convert religions and deconvert again, quit a respectable job, and so on in the manner of a trickster figure.

What differentiates Oscar from the trickster figure is an underlying vulnerability and earnestness in his struggle to create meaning. In this way, nepantla is a search through multiplicity for personal and communal enlightenment, painful as that might be in any given social context. This is illustrated by Oscar's continual desire to understand his social place in relation to others, which, after unraveling as the novel progresses, is returned to at its conclusion. Nepantla is a concept that has been championed in terms of activism, individual development and community building. Both Butler, Anzaldúa and, I will add, Acosta, locate "the possibility for change and activism at the crack, the brief interval between compulsory repetitions of the

performances that create societal norms” (Koegeler-Abdi 81). Striving for the same outcome and drawing attention to the “compulsory repetitions” of performance in the community, but utilizing different methods (such as satire), Acosta likewise presents a nepantlera space by questioning essentialized ethnicity and religion.

Acosta’s novel is relational to the community, which is illustrated by Oscar framing his own identity through continual reference to other individuals and society. The fact that Oscar’s interaction is satirical and often derogatory does not negate its communal aspect. Although at the end of the novel Oscar presents himself as a possible savior of the Chicano community in a way that indicates that his own position as savior is more important than the recipients of salvation—people he has yet to meet, incidentally (Acosta 196-198)—it is nevertheless the community’s validation, acceptance and interaction that matter to Oscar, even if framed in self-interested terms. He is exceptional but not exemplary, a hero that, in his capacity as a flawed narrator, shows the reader, through his first-hand experiences, some of the deep-rooted problems in a nationalist, patriarchal Chicano Movement (Hames-García ‘Gonzo’ 474).

In this sense, *Autobiography* can be termed ‘invoked art’, which means that more than being a commodity or technical achievement, it embodies a communal element that infuses it with a power to affect others and be affected by others (Anzaldúa *Borderlands* 67; Pérez *Chicana Art* 31) and what Laura Pérez calls “spiritual presence” (*Chicana Art* 31). Acosta’s art, in line with Anzaldúa, is communal due to its unabating contact with, and presentation of, social constructs, which are then managed and navigated (*Borderlands* 67), or at least there is an attempt to do so, though by the end of the novel one is left in some doubt as to Oscar’s authenticity in engaging with communal change for the sake of the community as opposed to a personal liberatory aesthetics (Carrasquillo 79-80). Acosta, in the satirical mode, remains ambiguous on this point, and it must be remembered that the narrator, despite his heartfelt tone in the concluding passage, remains a satirical creation. For example, Oscar states that he plans to have one million Brown Buffalos on his side and, despite this, he goes on: “I have no practical ego. I am not ambitious. [...] Once in every century there comes a man who is chosen to speak for his people. Moses, Mao and Martin are examples. Who’s to say that I am not such a man?” (Acosta 198), marking it as satire. However, there is a subtext in the novel that points to Oscar’s concern for society (Bruce-Novoa 49), which is upheld by the satirical

mode that, traditionally, has been utilized to expose corruption, in the broad sense, and spur change.¹⁵ Under Oscar's cynicism lies a deep concern for society, even if it is expressed as a desire to place himself at the center of political action (in the manner of a politician). At the end of the novel, Oscar writes letters to President Johnson, Robert F. Kennedy and the only Chicano elected official, Edward Roybal, a Congressman from Los Angeles, offering his services. His motivation is to get a "straight job" and expose corruption from the inside, which is inspired by a lawyer who did the same while working for Senator Dodd (Acosta 197).

The officials would never catch him in his capacity as 'spy' due to his tricky nature: "I can make any kind of face you ask. After all, I've been a football man, a drunk, a preacher, a mathematician, a musician, a lawyer... and a brown buffalo" (Acosta 197). Oscar's desire to expose corruption illustrates his concern for the community, though it is a subtext in the novel often overshadowed by his dominant personality. Despite his ambiguity as to Oscar's 'real' convictions or hopes for the future, Acosta's ability to present a narrator that succeeds in moving into an in-between space is a liberatory achievement and his use of satire suggests that *Autobiography* was intended to bring about social change. While at the end of the novel Oscar remains spiritually solitary, it is a solitariness that is continually referred back to others within the fragmented community and to the future Chicano Movement, which he is to join. The community's judgment, meanwhile, is that Oscar is in a state that resembles nepantla, and communicated by a Mexican judge who tells him to "go home and learn to speak [his] father's language" (Acosta 194) and then by a US border guard who tells him, as he tries to re-enter the country, that he does not "look like an American" (195).

Oscar's liberatory power is his ability to change personas through movement, just as Anzaldúa wrote that "cultural ambiguity" allows the mestiza, through the creative act of writing, to "modify and shape primordial energy and therefore [to be] able to change herself and others into turkey, coyote, tree, or human" (*Borderlands* 74). Laura Pérez notes that the 'borderlands' metaphor utilized by Anzaldúa does not equate a marginalized resource for the center's production of meaning, but rather becomes "a sign of the centrality of the marginalized, the mutable, and the unarticulated in the construction of fuller knowledges and identities" (*Chicana Art* 32). To para-

15 See Swift's 'A Modest Proposal' for a classic example; also for the Gonzo style as rooted in a concern for society see Wright.

phrase Pérez, Acosta, like Anzaldúa, shows that the too literal application of identity categories and signs can be misleading for individuals and communities alike, while ‘in-between’ the language exists a complexity of identities that allows one to reimagine the self (*Chicana Art* 32), just as one can reimagine oneself into a “turkey, coyote, tree, or human” (*Borderlands* 74). Likewise, Acosta’s narrative frames Oscar as a dominant yet contradictory, multi-ethnic and religious subject in movement and in contact with the community via shared ideologies and identity categories. By doing so, the text can be understood, strictly in terms of satire, as presenting a reimagined and a re-centered space in line with liberatory aesthetics and ‘invoked art’.

Ironically, through a crude, satirical application of identity categories Acosta “exceeds language” in order to allow the reader to imagine other identity formations, or to “reenvision other versions of self and reality” (Pérez *Chicana Art* 32), though such revised visions are only minimally presented in the novel itself. Beyond the community presented in *Autobiography* (the characters that make up Oscar’s reference points to society), it is the reader as a member of the community that is affected by the novel through a calculated, contradictory, at times shocking and tirelessly satirical narrative that challenges him or her to think beyond simplistic identity categorizations. Prodding the reader into imagining alternative realities is Acosta’s way of imbuing the novel with “spiritual presence and power” (Pérez *Chicana Art* 31).

Ethnic *Nepantla*

Open the novel to nearly any page and a character will be identified in terms of his or her ethnicity—often derogatorily. There are “greasers”, “spics”, “Japs”, “kikes”, “wops”, Indians, Italians, Chinese, Filipinos, and so on. Oscar is not immune to these terms: he is alternatively a Brown Buffalo, a Cro-Magnon Man, Blackfoot, Samoan, Little Black Sambo, a “nigger” (Acosta 94) and Aztec. Acosta has moved beyond race by intentionally adopting aesthetically and culturally constructed identities as a carnivalesque masquerade (Hames-García ‘Gonzo’ 463) or as performance, where the deconstructed self, which is in turn reconstructed inwardly, must be projected outwardly to a real and shifting society (Butler 272; Koegeler-Abdi 81).

The abovementioned ethnic designations draw attention to his darker skin color and his Other-ness. His Brown Buffalo persona alludes to his

indigenous ethnicity by linking it to the once prevalent buffalo, which was a staple of the Native American way of life, and his Mexican heritage, which has a much older claim to the Southwestern United States than the Anglo based on the idea of the ancient homeland Aztlán.¹⁶ The buffalo is a large, hairy, smelly, rather dumb herd animal that has been made nearly extinct, from an estimated 30 million in 1800 to a mere 1000 in 1889, through mass slaughter as sport on the part of the Anglo (Chamberlain 99). Oscar allegorically links the buffalo to the conquest of the Americas by Europeans and the subsequent decimation of the Indigenous population. The persona is created over the course of the novel, as when he describes himself as big (“I was always a fat kid” [Acosta 11]), loud, proud (he has the audacity to become a lawyer), and, when drunk and drugged in a semi-conscious or unconscious state, vacuous. From normative social standards, he is obnoxious and self-centered. An example occurs when Oscar tells the hitchhiker Karin Wilmington his life story, fueled by Budweiser and amphetamines. When she interrupts his monologue he “just wanted to drop her and be on [his] way” (Acosta 99). Though a subjected minority, as a man it is his voice that ‘should’ be heard, just as the Chicano Movement is formulated as a masculine expression.¹⁷ He is on a pilgrimage and the center of attention—the narrator, protagonist and hero—and he does not capitulate to Karin’s whiteness, beauty and wealth (Acosta 98). In short, the Brown Buffalo takes up a lot of space, both physically and metaphorically.

As Marcia Chamberlain has pointed out, Oscar’s fat body is “simultaneously the ultimate dream-come-true and the ultimate American nightmare” (92). Oscar has succeeded on one level—he has an over-abundance of food. On another level, he has *become* the Brown Buffalo, a living example of history, which society has done its best to shut out, as though trying to forget a nightmare. His Brown Buffalo persona is a failure on the level of the ‘American Dream’ myth marked by an acquisition of wealth and

16 Aztlán was the Aztecs’ mythical northern homeland, thought to be in the location that is now the Southwestern United States, before they migrated south to the region of current day Mexico City (Contreras 32; León 53-56).

17 I do not have space to take up gender issues in greater detail, but it is important to note that scholars do not agree on Acosta’s portrayal of gender. This disagreement largely hinges on what extent one takes the text as satire. For Hames-García, for example, the narrator’s flaws and the text’s satirical mode point to it being a critique of the sexist nationalism found in the Chicano Movement (‘Gonzo’ 473). Marci Carrasquillo, on the other hand, states, “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” (80).

social status, and it acts as a living, performing critique. Through his performance, Oscar brings attention to the nearly forgotten American history of Indigenous peoples, which acts as a proposed cure of the social amnesia that Benedict Anderson says nationalism is prone to (xv; Chamberlain 92). Oscar acts as a “historian with a sour stomach” (Acosta 18) driven to provocation by society’s projection of ethnic other-ness onto him. “All my life strangers have been interested in my ancestry. There is something about my bearing that cries out for history,” he states (Acosta 68). By claiming rights otherwise not allowed his ethnicity by the social status quo, he turns his ethnicity on its head and plays against—and with—the derogatory aspects projected onto it. Through constant code shifting and mockery, he explodes the cultural nationalist myth written into *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* while forcing the Anglo status quo to remember history.

By wearing, removing, and replacing ethnic masks, Oscar has become all ethnicities and none. Anzaldúa’s text *Borderlands/La Frontera* is also a deconstruction of various identifying categories, from language to sexuality and spirituality. This is not to say that Acosta and Anzaldúa’s texts are a negation of meaning or identity, however. Conversely, as James Clifford stresses, “practices of displacement” should be seen as “constitutive of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension” (3). In line with Clifford, Mexican Americans are largely a diasporic people, with either peoples migrating or, in terms of the annexation of parts of Mexico by the United States in 1848, borders migrating. In *Autobiography* there is, in addition to the Mexican diaspora in the United States, Oscar’s geographical displacement on a more local scale (pilgrimage), occupational displacement (from lawyer to drop-out), and identity displacement (from Mexican American to a form of nepantlera consciousness beyond ethnicity and into religious transcendentalism).

In other words, Oscar’s sidestepping of categorization is a form of displacement that constitutes meaning, just as Anzaldúa’s texts create a new nepantlera identity through a tearing down of the aforementioned categories. Meaning-through-movement is illustrated in Oscar’s carnivalesque freedom, as seen in the ‘on the road’ trope. Bakhtin states, “While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (7). He goes on to say that this carnival spirit is universal while it reigns: it is “the world’s revival and renewal” that affects everybody (Bakhtin 7). Rather than behaving like a Mexican American (i.e. subjugated), Oscar’s narrative is marked by car-

nivalesque mayhem informed by an irreverence of hierarchy and normative social codes.

Categories such as ethnicity and religion, which are normally taken for granted as fitting into preordained categories by a society that is highly attuned to ideological differences, are no longer off limits or 'holy' during Oscar's remarkable narrative, which goes against the grain of how subjugated minorities in the United States were (and are) expected to behave. It is an "escape from the usual official way of life" (Bakhtin 7), which, for the Chicano/a, was, and often still is, racism and subjugation. In *Autobiography* all are equal because everyone is mocked for his or her ethnicity.

Religious Nepantla

There is a three-tier displacement of religious experience in *Autobiography*, each of which adds to the novel's denouement, which is framed in nepantlera terms, or as Oscar being neither Mexican, American, Catholic or Protestant. It is through loss, transfer, displacement, transformation, and the movement from one bank to the other that Oscar symbolically secures a social position, which is framed religiously. He exists in-between three voluminous categories—Catholic, Protestant and Aztec. That it is a nepantlera position signifies that meaning is not definitive if even quite definable, but rather subject to change and on-going failure, revision, dismantling and creation, just as ethnic roles are taken up, put down, subverted and used creatively.

Acosta offers the position of nepantla as the Chicano/a's (rewritten) position as Other in the United States. It is partly inherited in the form of ancestry and partly created by actively stepping out of ethnic and religious categorization. Ironically, it is due to his experiences as an ethnic Mexican American that he can transcend ethnic and religious categories. Just as Acosta's representation of ethnic identity is undercut through satire, so is his religious identity. In each religious stage, Oscar reinvents symbols and rearranges relationships in order to change culturally derived religious meanings. Oscar's religious *needs* inform his religion, rather than the other way around.

As an ethnically Mexican American Catholic, Oscar's religious need is to be part of what was, as a child and young man, a rather insular Mexican American community in Riverbank, California. Though an American citizen, he differentiates between his own Mexican American community

and Anglos. For example, of his teacher Miss Anderson, he says, "I looked upon her as one of the few Americans I could trust" (Acosta 94). When confronted with the need to assimilate to the Anglo system at school, and hence distance himself from his perceived Mexican American-ness, he changes his religion. After becoming sexualized, he found Mexican girls "quite simply, a drag" (Acosta 113) and longed for blonde, "pig-tailed American girl[s]" that were Protestant rather than Catholic (Acosta 88). His move away from Mexican American culture in the form of the girls he chased and people he spent time with meant he no longer had a need for Catholicism.

The transfer from Catholicism to Protestantism took him some time to accomplish, as illustrated by the humorous episode where Alice, his thirteen-year-old, 'American' (i.e. "white" [Acosta 150]) girlfriend asks him if he believes in Jesus. "Sure. I told you I was Catholic," Oscar says. "Daddy says some Catholics don't believe in Jesus," she says. "You can tell him this one does. He's my favorite saint," Oscar assures her (Acosta 115). Upon hearing Oscar's Hispanicized name, Alice's mother forces her to write Oscar a letter saying that they can never again meet (hence the need for the letter). Oscar's response is simple: "There's no problem in a name change" (Acosta 117). Alice's stepfather, a Baptist deacon, "hated Mexicans more than life itself" (Acosta 117). Furthermore, he tried to rape Alice when she was 12 years old (Acosta 117), which, by its proximity to the description of racial hatred, is linked to it. He is a caricature of the hypocritically religious, hateful, male tyrant.

None of this seems to bother Oscar, for it is the blonde, pig-tailed girl that he desires and the details (religion affiliation and what parents or society might say) do not concern him, and he sums up his rationale with "But what the hell, *she loved me!*" (Acosta 117). As Oscar's needs change so does his religion, which is seen as a self-centered means to an end rather than a spiritual experience. Oscar's goal is framed as a kind of strategic essentialism in relation to the Anglo community, which destabilizes his position as a Mexican American.

Oscar's conversion to the Baptist church (highly ironic due to the racism he experienced from a deacon of that church) is a desire to assimilate as well as charged with sexual desire for 'white' girls. It is the desire for specific results that causes Oscar to convert, not the religion itself or any relationship with the divine or God. Hence, Oscar utilizes religious poetics to make religion fit his need, which was to be Anglicized. Just as *La Vir-*

*gen de Guadalupe*¹⁸ reigns south of the border, it is the Holy Spirit that is King in the Protestant United States (León 208). In order to enter into the American mainstream Oscar has to symbolically abandon the dark-skinned goddess Guadalupe, and by extension the more ambivalent female aspect of spirituality, and accept the Holy Spirit, and in turn a more masculine, works-orientated Protestant religion, as a means to reach his ends. Religious conversion should, Oscar had hoped, lead to assimilation. Never one to do things half-heartedly, he acts as a missionary in Puerto Rico, converting the San Blas Indians, “black Jamaicans” and “brown Panamanians” by feeding them what he later decides is a “crock of shit” (Acosta 133). While Catholicism simply *was*, Protestantism must be acted out with tangible results. He realizes he has more in common with those he is trying to convert than his white, Baptist colleagues, however, who do not accept him socially. The religion does not fulfill its assigned purpose or serve Oscar’s concrete needs.

Oscar’s third tier is Aztec religious expression. His pilgrimage is textually informed by the “Aztec Palimpsest” (Alarcon), which is the residue of Aztec symbols residing in the contemporary moment that have, in relation to my purposes here, an effect on current religious and cultural expression.¹⁹ Chicano/a writers confront the Mexican American religious experience as a blend of Catholicism, Protestantism and evangelical Anglo religions, folk healing, *curandismo*, and Indigenous Mexican religions through transculturation (Carrasco ‘Hurricane’ 361). Though numerous indigenous Mexican religions exist, just as various languages and ethnicities exist, it is the Aztecs who have been symbolically charged with cultural and religious meaning in the 20th and 21st centuries, due, in part, to their being the dominant power at the time of Cortés’s conquest of Mexico. Symbolically, Mexicans (and hence Mexican Americans) are the children of the first coupling that produced *mestiza* offspring, between Cortés, a Spaniard, and Ma-

18 On 12 December 1531 *La Virgen de Guadalupe* appeared to a humble Aztec Indian named Juan Diego. She appeared with dark skin and spoke to him in Nahuatl, his native language. After several attempts, Juan Diego finally succeeded in convincing Archbishop Zumárraga of this apparition by presenting out-of-season blooming roses in his coarse-fiber cape, upon which was also imprinted the Virgin’s image. Since this time *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has been venerated and has developed into *La Lupe*, the familiar Mother of Mexico. Pope John Paul II declared 12 December a holy day in the Americas on his visit to Mexico in 2002 and for the estimated 90% of Mexicans that call themselves Catholic, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is the primary symbol of religious identity (León 61-64).

19 Anzaldúa writes about the connection between pre-Columbian Mexican art, food and customs and contemporary Chicano/a art production in ‘Border Arte: Nepantla, el Lugar de la Frontera’.

linche, his indigenous translator, guide and mistress. Though problematic for the simple reason that Mexicans, and as a result Mexican Americans, are made up of many ethnic groups, symbolically they have Aztec *sangre* (blood) running through their veins (see *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*), a point Acosta does not address due to his presentation of Aztec culture at a nostalgic and exotic level, as illustrated by his reference to Mexicans having “that ancient air of patience which I’d always seen in the faces of the *indio* from the mountains of Durango” (184).

Aztec-centrism was prevalent at the time of the Chicano Movement and is recognizable in the depictions of indigenous heritage by Chicano/a artists, which are often images of Aztec warriors, for example, rather than some other, less easily recognizable group. As mentioned above, Acosta also links the Brown Buffalo persona to the effects of colonialism. Taken as tropes these elements create the “Aztec palimpsest”, which in turn helped to authenticate the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. If all Mexicans are Aztec (the nationalism that binds together *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*), it follows that together they can reclaim a position of cultural and institutional power that was once theirs. In *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, this claim was phrased with religiously tinged pre-destination.

This is the context in which Acosta wrote, and Oscar borrows from the Aztec religion, even if on a minimal level, to transcend the Catholic/Protestant binary in the United States. In *Autobiography* the road trip is important as a pilgrimage and it is also termed religiously, albeit satirically. Over the course of the pilgrimage Oscar tells about his childhood as a devout, Mexican American Catholic, as well as his experiences in the Protestantism of the Anglo and a discovery of himself through the transforming effect of drugs and alcohol. Budweiser beer is a constant fixture as Oscar drives up and down the United States, but so are peyote, mescaline, cocaine, LSD and marijuana. Through the ingestion of these substances Acosta perceives himself as god-like for moments.

This is a trope in the Aztec religion in which Aztec religious leaders transformed humans into gods and then ritualistically sacrificed the ‘god’ and ate him or her in order to become god-like themselves (Carrasco ‘Cosmic’ 434; Paz 56). Oscar-as-god does not have an ethnicity; rather he is a form-changer, now a Blackfoot, now a Samoan, now a Brown Buffalo or an Aztec or symbolically presented as Jesus Christ (Acosta 18; 194; 198). In terms of drugs and alcohol, he assures the reader that he can “handle anything” (Acosta 56). Through hallucinations he experiences ecstasy. Up

in the mountains, with hash and red wine, he plays his clarinet and calls up “the dead ghosts of [his] Aztec ancestors” (Acosta 158). By experiencing god-like moments, Acosta transcends the ethnic and religious categories that were so prevalent in the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

At the end of the novel Oscar states the following: “My single mistake has been to seek an identity with any one person or nation or with any part of history. [...] [W]hat 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” (Acosta 199). As the quote illustrates, part of Oscar’s identity is not chosen, i.e. his ancestry. However, the construction of his Brown Buffalo persona is framed as a choice. This ‘choice’ could be understood as a form of strategic essentialism resulting from his inability to penetrate the Anglo American community through his occupation, religion, values and ethnicity, on the one hand, and Mexican culture due to his inability to speak the language and his American up-bringing on the other. Oscar’s choice, or positioning, is then presented as the potential to be a great leader of Chicano/as in the tradition of Moses, Mao and Martin Luther King Jr. (Acosta 198).

However, if this presentation of Chicano/a revelation is also satire, as I believe it to be, due to the offhanded mentioning of one million followers consisting of people Oscar has yet to meet and the comparison of himself with Moses, Mao and Martin (Acosta 198), this is yet another level of destabilization and deconstruction of stable identity categories—in this case the great historical hero and leader of a people. Oscar once again side-steps categorization through reference to well-defined identity categories in parallel with, yet at a constant remove from, the community that is his reference point, hence furthering the creation of his persona(s) defined by in-betweenness and movement. As a result, Oscar’s decision is to continue on the unstable path of identity in continual revision framed through satire. Nepantlera consciousness is also framed as a choice—a creation—and this license to enter the in-between space is a central theme in *Autobiography*. Anzaldúa writes: “What I want is an accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture”

(*Borderlands* 44). This quote again emphasizes the creative act, the conscious will to enter in-between existing identification categories to create a new identity based on the borderlands experience.

Both writers agree that identity formation—in any case for the activist interested in dealing with these issues—is beyond ‘us’ and ‘them’ or the Other. For an active creation of identity outside, yet still informed by, categories, the concept of *nepantla* helps define a space in which categories are sidestepped. Paradoxically, it is in a space with more choices, even if these choices may seem to be imposed or heavily restricted, that the agency of the individual comes to the fore, and it is in this capacity that *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* illustrates a distinct Chicano/a experience as Other in the United States.

Conclusion

Oscar is on a pilgrimage that ends in the realization that many of society’s identity categories, when held up to the light of satire and mockery, are superfluous or do not correspond to his complex realities. Acosta utilizes the Aztec palimpsest, firsthand borderland experiences (figurative and literal), ethnicity, exposure to various religions and his relation to the community to create a *nepantlera* space in order to negotiate life’s many challenges. For Acosta, cultural and religious in-betweenness became a choice constituted by movement and revision rather than an endpoint.

In applying a *nepantlera* theoretical framework to a text, the ways in which in-betweenness is described and created become more apparent. In Acosta’s novel, ethnic and religious in-betweenness are important themes that express Oscar’s situation in relation to society. Applying *nepantla* to a textual reading calls attention to the multiplicity of ethnic categories that one individual can be influenced by while not feeling wholly part of any of them. Throughout the novel it is apparent that Oscar is creating this in-between space as well as describing his perceived reality. He identifies himself as being Samoan, a Blackfoot, Aztec, Chicano and so on, without noting the contradiction, which forces the reader to imagine possible alternatives and solutions, which is in line with the satirical tradition. Religious categories, in the ideological formations of mid-20th century USA, just as their ethnic equivalents, were understood to be quite static ideological constructions.

That a Mexican American Catholic would become a Baptist and ultimately utilize a form of subjective Aztec (or Chicano/a-Aztec) religious

coding to frame the cultural and social struggle at hand illustrates that religious categorization can also be sidestepped. This reading highlights Oscar's continual desire to understand his social position by referencing the positions of others in a multiplicity of categories. By showing that Oscar does not narrate his experiences in simplistic terms of 'us' and 'them', or from any static position that can be categorized, but rather as a multiplicity in which he is located in a conceptual space in-between multiple categories and in movement, a reading utilizing the concept of nepantla broadens the understanding and applicability of non-diachronic identity formations.

Nepantla's applicability for scholarly research is manifold. Beyond the application of nepantla for a reading of literary texts, it can also be used to describe and analyze ways in which in-betweenness exists and is created in fields such as American Studies, Migration Studies, Diaspora Studies, Ethnology, Anthropology or anywhere that ideologies and borders, both figurative and literal, are crossed. Nepantla's strength, I believe, lies in its ability to help researchers better understand non-diachronic relations that are creatively constructed as multiplicities in-between existing categories. It could also be used to further develop concepts such as transnationalism, transculturalism and translocality, multiculturalism, performativity, assemblages and others. Nepantla does more than describe situations, but allows the researcher to analyze how and why such situations exist. Further, Anzaldúa framed it as a method by which activists can change individual and societal situations. Underlying nepantla is its creative force, which means that the multiplicity of an individual or community can be utilized to an advantage by re-imagining possible identity formations. Acosta's satirical critique of the homogenous Chicano Movement and American society is an example of applied nepantla, and it is through the work of people like Acosta, Anzaldúa and others that society has become, and hopefully will continue to become, more aware of the existing multiplicity.

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