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## "La vida es el honor y el recuerdo": Oscar Zeta Acosta's Paratextual Struggle for Survival

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# "LA VIDA ES EL HONOR Y EL RECUERDO": OSCAR ZETA ACOSTA'S PARATEXTUAL STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

ALLISON FAGAN

*Dead or alive or even both, eh? That's one thing they can't  
take away from you.*  
—Hunter S. Thompson, "The Banshee Screams for Buffalo  
Meat" (1977)

When Hunter S. Thompson eulogized his friend Oscar Zeta Acosta in a 1977 *Rolling Stone* article entitled "Fear and Loathing: The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat," he had to acknowledge that the man was, at the time, only missing and not yet legally declared dead. That final declaration, he explains, would take "four more years." Acosta, missing since 1974, left behind two published novels—*The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973)—an explosive career as a Chicano activist lawyer, two ex-wives, a son, and a tumultuous friendship with Thompson. Thompson seems to feel that this in-between status, neither dead nor alive, that finally marks Acosta is fitting for such a complex

personality. A source of power, even. It is perhaps also a fitting description for his work: both *Autobiography* and *Revolt* went out of print shortly after publication, but were since re-issued in 1989, due in large part to the efforts of Acosta's son, Marco Acosta. Neither dead nor quite alive, their continued existence in print depends on their inclusion in two different "canons" of American literature: Chicano and gonzo. Scholars celebrate Acosta's books as offering an insider's view into the Chicano Movement, while readers and fans of Thompson arrive at Acosta's texts when they find out that his character "Dr. Gonzo"—or "the inspiration for Benicio Del Toro's character [sic] in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*" (Rodriguez 2011), as one reader describes him—wrote books, too.<sup>1</sup>

While many scholars are either primarily focused on what Acosta brings to Chicano literature, or on what he brings to the genre of gonzo journalism (as well as many other "mainstream" American literary genres of the 1950s, 60s and 70s), many more have acknowledged these mutual and competing influences as shaping our understanding of his work. For instance, Juan Bruce-Novoa describes the differences between Thompson's and Acosta's gonzo techniques as evidence of the Chicano's different position in American society: he claims that the gonzo style requires "privileged aloofness" (1979, 45), which is something that the Chicano Acosta sometimes cannot afford. Likewise, Horst Tonn demonstrates the way Acosta's writing participates in the traditional Chicano narrative of counter-history, which "unhinges and sometimes ridicules the official version" (1986, 197) of history using New Journalistic techniques. At the heart of these arguments is the belief that a text like *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* works by using the techniques of gonzo journalism, which focus on the recording of historical events as a participant rather than an observer and creating a frenetic style that makes it difficult for a reader to discern the lines between fact and fiction, to destabilize the essentialism at the heart of ethnic and cultural nationalism from within. Acosta's "Zeta" acts as both a participant in and a critical observer of the Chicano Movement, and Acosta uses him to satirize the problematic hypermasculinity of the Chicano nationalist identity, emphasizing how essentialist notions of ethnic identity structure and attempt to regulate sexual desire.<sup>2</sup>

Joining in this continuing examination of the mutual interdependency of the narrative of Chicano identity and the genre of gonzo journalism, I want to go a step further, expanding that discussion to focus on how the history of publishing Acosta's books intersects

with the destabilized Chicano narrative Acosta presents. I argue that an exploration of this publishing history demonstrates the way Acosta's gonzo status frequently makes him a problematic Chicano at the same time his Chicano status makes him a problematic gonzo. In *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, Acosta/Zeta is gonzo, Chicano, and yet not. These simultaneous narratives of outsider status are made strikingly apparent in two paratextual elements of the 1989 Vintage edition of Acosta's book: the introduction, written by Thompson, and the multiple drawings of cockroaches that randomly appear in the pages of the text first published by Straight Arrow Books. Both the introduction and the design of the book demonstrate the way Acosta's text was and continues to be shaped by the authorial and editorial interests of the people supporting him: Thompson's and those of the editors and designers at Straight Arrow. Exploring the paratext of *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* offers an opportunity to underscore not only the hierarchical relationship between Thompson and Acosta in terms of their claims on the genre of gonzo journalism, but also the racial and ethnic hierarchies at play in promoting and preserving Acosta's legacy on the part of Straight Arrow. The introduction reinforces the notion that Acosta and his work visually and perhaps literally depend on the more famous white author for recognition, while the visual and symbolic presence of the cockroaches also emphasizes what I call "combatively collaborative" narratives—authorial and editorial—of Chicano identity. Acosta participates in combative collaborations in the sense that he and his texts neither fully embrace nor fully reject his relationships to Thompson and Straight Arrow. That our access to a complex, gonzo depiction of Chicano identity is preceded and therefore made palatable, even possible by the accolades of the famed white gonzo journalist and is shaped by the intentions of the book's editors, designers, and illustrators encourages us to pay further attention to the ways textual authority and textual survival are tied to complex negotiations of race and ethnicity. And an analysis of the relationships between Acosta, Thompson, and Straight Arrow reveals the perhaps flawed though necessary survival mechanisms through which Acosta adopts modes of strategic essentialism, embracing a stable Chicano and cockroach identity as variously defined by himself and his white supporters while advancing a critique of that same identity from within.

In the sections that follow, I trace the historical and textual significance of each of these paratextual elements in order to

underscore the way Acosta's narrative is both supported and undermined by them. In the first section, I explore the sources of Thompson's introduction to Acosta's reissued text, focusing not only on how Thompson's language shapes our understanding of Acosta, but also and perhaps more importantly on what that introduction erases and elides: Acosta's own argument that he was a co-author of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (Thompson 1971a). I argue that as a forgotten contributor to the development of gonzo, Acosta and his book are put under erasure by narratives that celebrate Thompson, the white author, as the sole literary creator of the genre with Dr. Gonzo as his sidekick. The introduction paradoxically replicates that process of erasure by celebrating Acosta's work at the same time it alters the conditions for its interpretation. In the second section, I argue that the combatively collaborative interests of Acosta and Straight Arrow are rendered most clearly in its narrative and paratextual depictions of cockroaches. The text offers multiple definitions as well as images of cockroaches, sometimes as stand-ins for Chicanos, sometimes as an entirely new identity marker, and sometimes as a straightforward depiction of the inhuman. This multiplicity is both a demonstration of the politically fraught nature of white publishers attempting to publish and promote a Chicano author—the representations of the cockroach collide in occasionally problematic ways with Acosta's—and a reinforcement of Acosta's own narrative dissatisfaction with any singular identity. Taken together, these paratextual elements act as gateways into understanding the historical and political circumstances surrounding the publication and continued reception of Acosta's work. My study of them aims to show how Thompson and Straight Arrow participate in the celebratory marginalization of Acosta's work.

#### ACOSTA AS (NON) GONZO: HUNTER S. THOMPSON AND AUTHORIAL ERASURE

In his 1989 introduction to the re-issue of Acosta's 1973 autofiction *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, Thompson quotes from the previously published obituary, describing the long-missing Acosta as "too weird to live and too rare to die" (7). Thompson's position as the paratextual gateway into Acosta's text appears on the surface to be both a moving reflection of their friendship and an attempt at subtle marketing of the book by "a writer whose reputation is

more firmly established than the author's" (Genette 1997, 268).<sup>3</sup> However, in a textual space where Thompson's words precede and shape readers' access to Acosta, the complexity of their intertwined writing and publishing histories—including Acosta's contested role in the genesis of gonzo journalism and the events that led to the shift in his status from co-author to Samoan sidekick in Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*—cannot be ignored. Acosta's own tribute to Thompson, at least in the aftermath of that book's publication, is much less celebratory: "He has taken my best lines and used me" (quoted in Stavans 1995, 99).

This complicated relationship between Acosta and Thompson is written onto the 1989 edition of *The Revolt of the Cockroach People's* cover page, which promises an "Introduction by Hunter S. Thompson." That introduction turns out to be a condensed version of Thompson's eulogy to Acosta, written in the months after his 1974 disappearance from Mazatlán, Mexico. Acosta, born in El Paso in 1935, grew up in California, became a member of the US Air Force, participated as a missionary to a leper colony in Panama, studied at San Francisco State University, and eventually became a legal aid lawyer, representing most famously the St. Basil 21 as well as Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales. In 1970, he ran for sheriff of Los Angeles on the platform that he would dismantle the sheriff's office; he lost by a wide margin, but also managed to garner over 100,000 votes. He was last seen in Mazatlán in 1974 and last heard from by his son Marco in May of that year. He is perhaps most well-known for his excessive personality: excessive in all matters, including but not limited to alcohol and drug abuse, leading to Thompson's description in the introduction of Acosta as,

thirty-three and a half years old with a head full of Sandoz acid, a loaded .357 Magnum in his belt, a hatchet-wielding Chicano bodyguard on his elbow at all times, and a disconcerting habit of projectile-vomiting geysers of pure red blood off the front porch every thirty or forty minutes, or whenever his malignant ulcer can't handle any more raw tequila. (Thompson 1989, 6)

This striking image precedes, competes with, and perhaps alters Acosta's own opening description of himself as a "brown-eyed child of the sun . . . carrying little white candles as weapons" (1972, 11). Thompson's description comes from "Fear & Loathing: The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat," published in the December 15, 1977 issue of *Rolling Stone*, essentially closing the book on Acosta's life. The

eight-page essay details Acosta's life, the continued post-1974 Acosta sightings, and Thompson's own relationship with the "rotten fat spic" (Thompson 1989, 6).

In its much condensed form, the introduction to *Revolt* touches on the major high points of Thompson's original essay: their first meeting, the rumor mill that continues to circulate news of Elvis-like Acosta sightings, the celebratory descriptions of Acosta as "one of God's own prototypes" (Thompson 1989, 7). But slimmed down to just a little over two pages, the introduction loses some of its historical references included in the *Rolling Stone* version: it deletes the narrative of Acosta's anxious relationship with the Brown Berets (loosely described as the Chicano iteration of the Black Panthers), an analysis of the similarities and differences between Acosta and Richard Nixon, and most significantly for this essay, the history surrounding the publication of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson's most famous work. In the longer essay, Thompson details the complicated process by which Acosta came to threaten to sue Thompson over his portrayal in *Fear and Loathing*. As his essay explains it, in the aftermath of the death of journalist Rubén Salazar during the Chicano Moratorium in 1970, Acosta reached out to Thompson in an effort to publicize the cover-up surrounding Salazar's death and to bring national attention to the Chicano Movement in general. The result was "Strange Rumbblings in Aztlán," an essay Thompson published in *Rolling Stone* on April 29, 1971. The meeting of these two men also led to the beginning of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The story goes that as Thompson and Acosta struggled to speak comfortably to one another (Acosta apparently had some imposing-looking Chicano militant bodyguards), they took the opportunity afforded by a *Sports Illustrated* job of Thompson's to cover the Mint 400 in Las Vegas to spend more time with one another. That, combined with a second trip by Acosta and Thompson to Vegas a few weeks later, completed the gathering of material for that novel. Large portions of these trips were captured by Thompson's ever-present audio recorder, and as the novel developed, he relied on these taped conversations, sometimes transcribing them word for word. For instance, the infamous scene in which Dr. Gonzo asks a waitress where they can find the American Dream, and they end up being referred to a literal location—"the old Psychiatrist's Club"—is taken directly from audio recordings of Acosta and Thompson's road trip, and represented as such. In Thompson's novel (first published in *Rolling Stone* in two parts), Acosta became Dr. Gonzo,



the 300-pound Samoan attorney. And as Thompson tells it in “The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat,” this description is what led to Acosta’s objection to the publication of the novel.

Describing Acosta as depressed and desperate in the aftermath of a drug bust that led the Chicano Movement to ostracize him, Thompson calls Acosta’s objection a “final crazed leap for the great skyhook” (1977, 53), a last-ditch effort to claim some fame. In “Banshee Screams,” Thompson writes that while his lawyers originally sent Acosta a copy of the book for approval and worried that he might object to his portrayal as crazed and drug-addled and only thinly veiled, Acosta fired back a response that signaled his disgust with being cast as a Samoan, whom he referred to as “waterhead South Sea mongrels.” As Thompson rather speciously explains, “the *only* thing that bothered him” (54; emphasis added) was this representation: strangely, it seems, Acosta wanted not less of a connection with this depiction of himself, but more. Among his demands: include his name on the cover as well as a photograph of himself on the dust jacket. According to Thompson, “the libel lawyers have never understood what Oscar had in mind—and, at the time, I didn’t understand it myself” (54). Thompson frames this ordeal, the sudden rage Acosta displayed, in terms of Acosta’s seemingly self-destructive nature. Certainly associating himself with the criminal acts depicted in the book would lead to Acosta’s disbarment. Thompson believes that Acosta wanted to torch his career as a lawyer in order to assert his position as “neo-prophet who was already long overdue for his gig at the top of the Mountain” (57). Ultimately, Thompson interprets Acosta’s desire to be named on the cover of the book as Acosta’s attempt to destroy the Chicano lawyer and give birth to the Chicano writer.

Thompson’s version of events offers one clue to understanding the combatively collaborative relationship between the two men. In both his longer essay and the shortened introduction, it is clear that Thompson and Acosta seemed to truly care for one another in that brotherly way of flinging foul-mouthed insults even in the event of one’s untimely disappearance and likely death. But the larger clue may be an absent one: this entire description of the events surrounding the publication of *Fear and Loathing* is removed from the introduction to Acosta’s text, eliminating any mention of Acosta’s contestation of Thompson’s own work. That introduction also erases Thompson’s anger over Acosta’s demands, expressed in “Banshee Screams” as culminating in “[his] sudden and savage

decision that the Treacherous bastard should have his nuts ripped off with a plastic fork—and then fed like big meat grapes to my peacocks” (1977, 53). These erasures of Thompson’s original text attempt to simplify the history as well as solidify the relationship between Thompson and Acosta as one of leader and follower, gonzo journalist and Samoan sidekick.<sup>4</sup> Readers without access to these descriptions are conditioned in their entry into *Revolt* to understand Acosta as Thompson’s larger-than-life sidekick rather than his occasional authorial enemy.

And while Thompson is certainly correct that Acosta’s desire to be named had something to do with an effort to transform himself into a prominent figure outside his role as Chicano lawyer, Thompson also elides the simpler explanation for why Acosta might demand a byline and photo: Acosta felt that he had played a large enough part in writing Thompson’s book to be listed as co-author. As Ilan Stavans notes, “In Zeta’s circle the certitude remains that Thompson was only marginally the author of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*” (1995, 99). Acosta reacted to reading the manuscript by turning to editor Alan Rinzler, saying, “My god! Hunter has stolen my soul! . . . He has wrung me dry for material” (quoted in Stavans 1995, 99). Acosta’s anger concerned not only his representation as a Samoan, as Thompson suggests, but also, more specifically, with the lack of acknowledgment of his role in the genesis of the novel and in gonzo journalism as a whole. Raul Salinas, a Chicano poet and a contemporary of Acosta’s, notes, “Zeta was a very important person . . . an optimist, a dreamer, always encouraging things to change. But the Anglo establishment exploited his talent. In his case it was Hunter Thompson. That guy stole Brown Buffalo’s gonzo style; he turned it into mass-produced merchandise” (quoted in Barrios 2008). Challenging Thompson’s version of events, Greg Wright notes, Acosta “wanted full recognition of the role he played in the book’s creation, not legal asylum in anonymity” (2010, 634). This meant not only acknowledging Acosta as a Chicano in the narrative, but also the authorial role he played in the creation of that narrative. In his response to Thompson, Acosta objects to Thompson’s problematic replacement of one “ethnic” or “othered” identity with another by demanding recognition for who he “really” is: a Chicano and a collaborator in the production of the text.<sup>5</sup> By demanding to be identified, and specifically by rejecting his categorization as a Samoan, Acosta recognizes the need to “choose again strategically” (Spivak 1990, 11), to identify the character of his authorial erasure

as motivated by racial politics, and specifically a racial politics that aims to speak for Chicanos rather than allow them to speak.

In the end, Acosta conceded to the publication, though it is clear he felt that racial politics fueled the controversy. In an undated letter to “David,” Acosta writes, “I gave Hunter the waiver he kept bellyaching for because he pulled his power stunt and got Max to provide him legal counsel and Jann [Wenner, publisher of *Rolling Stone*] to withhold his empire from my use . . . Neither have so much as recognized the possibility of racism in their dealings with me. I never expected anything differently.”<sup>6</sup> And while he did not receive co-author credit, and the character in the novel remains a Samoan, a photograph of both Thompson and Acosta together was placed on the back cover of the novel.<sup>7</sup> Shortly thereafter, Rinzler offered Acosta a contract for the first of his two books to be published by Straight Arrow Books, *Rolling Stone*’s newly formed book division (perhaps what Acosta meant by Wenner’s “empire”). While Acosta has suggested that the contracts were offered in exchange for his dropping the lawsuit, Rinzler asserts, “it was totally my decision and no one else’s (not Jann or Hunter) to offer him a contract and work with him to develop his very good first book” (A. Rinzler pers. comm.).<sup>8</sup> Both books that would come to be published by Straight Arrow—*Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973)—represented an opportunity for Acosta to establish himself as a co-creator of gonzo journalism and to develop the Chicano voice of gonzo.

And yet the long view demonstrates what has become of Acosta’s role in Thompson’s novel as well as in gonzo journalism: in many ways, he has been functionally erased. Though Acosta utilized many of the same techniques as Thompson, “convert[ing] chaos into a utopian anarchy of both forensic and poetic form” (Saldívar 1990, 98), Acosta’s books went out of print shortly after publication. Nearly twenty years later, Acosta’s son spurred the 1989 re-issues onward as Chicano Studies programs came into academic prominence. Thompson’s introduction to those reissued texts, the gateway to the revival of Acosta’s own literary production, deletes the controversy, removing the debate over authorship while increasing the distance between celebrated author and disappeared sidekick. In an introduction meant to celebrate Acosta, Thompson manages to simplify the terms of their writing relationship.<sup>9</sup> The subject of both “Banshee Screams” and the introduction is Acosta, yet both texts manage to eliminate his role in that central gonzo text—*Fear and*

*Loathing*—first by reframing Acosta’s concerns and demands, and then by erasing them altogether.

Acosta himself sensed this erasure as it happened, penning a playfully serious letter to *Playboy* following that magazine’s description of gonzo journalism as created by Thompson. The article, appearing in November 1973, entitled “Hunter S. Thompson, Commando Journalist,” describes gonzo as such: “His method, known as Gonzo journalism (his term), involves participating in the story, filling his notebooks with whatever comes up and printing all of it with few if any changes. It produces a very cranked-up style and he stays well cranked in order to maintain the pace: Guacamole, Dos Equis and MDA are the staples of his diet” (188). In the letter Acosta wrote in response, he describes the development of gonzo journalism as a collaborative project between Thompson and himself, “hand in hand,” adding a postscript: “the guacamole and XX [Dos Equis beer] he got from me” (Acosta 1996, 109). Acosta claims the references to the stereotypically Mexican food for his own, insisting that he supplied the “ethnic” characteristics at the heart of the genre. In so doing, Acosta strategically enacts Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s claim that “you pick up the universal that will give you the power to fight against the other side” (1990, 12): the power of the genre, at least for Acosta, comes in recognizing its roots in Chicano experience.

In a 1974 letter to Random House editor Helen Brann, Acosta was decidedly more straightforward: “I know full well that I am a good writer and a unique storyteller. A lot of the credit that has gone to the so-called ‘Gonzo Journalism’ is rightfully mine but because Hunter and his agent Lynn Nesbit of IFA [agency] have all the connections, he has gotten it all—the bread & the credit.”<sup>10</sup> More specifically, Acosta claimed on more than one occasion that he originally intended to include a description of his own participation in the writing of *Fear and Loathing* in his first novel. Acosta had sent Brann a ten page plot summary for a third book, in which he planned to narrate not only the events surrounding the writing of *Fear and Loathing* but also what he saw as a conspiracy between Thompson and *Rolling Stone* to prevent him from ever telling that story. In his description of chapter 3, for example, he writes,

Between October and January of 71, the Brown Buffalo (aka General Zeta) writes his first book, including the part of Gonzo & Duke in Las Vegas. During X-Mas week, Duke and Weenie, the editor of Rolling Rag Mag, wine and dine Buffalo, providing him with the acid-rock groupies, including Miss It, the advertising Queen of the

famous rock & roll mag . . . all for the purpose of editing out the section on the Gonzo-Duke rip-off. (Acosta 1974a)

Just as Thompson's introduction erases the authorial controversy, it would seem that Acosta's own texts must erase it, too. Though Héctor Calderón cites this as evidence of a man who was "alone and sick . . . his state of mind . . . complicated by recurring depression and physical illness" (2004, 97), it does offer insight into Acosta's story of his own role in Thompson's work.<sup>11</sup> But like the introduction to his book, it is an almost untold story. The book, never written, exists only as an idea, as a plan. Acosta's version of events, be they truthful, exaggerated, or even outright lies, lives only in hints about his desire to be recognized as part of the movement, part of the genre.

Acosta's concern for the ownership of ideas also stretches beyond a distaste for not being given credit himself: Acosta's vision, depicted in the *Playboy* letter, was one of mutual collaboration, co-authorship but also partnership with others who influenced their thinking, including Robert Henry, to whom Acosta refers as "Savage Henry, the Scag Baron of Las Vegas" or "the Owl" (1996, 109). Acosta resists the description of the genesis of gonzo in general and *Fear and Loathing* in particular as deriving from a single source: beyond claiming credit for himself, Acosta suggests a far-reaching concept of authorship informed by the suggestions and ideas of a range of people in both Thompson's and Acosta's lives. But at the same time, Acosta also feared that others might see him as stealing ideas from Thompson. In a letter to Thompson in 1972, around the time he would have been writing *Revolt*, he tells him, "I've cut out the entire Las Vegas thing as such. I decided you wouldn't understand it and that others might accuse me of using your book as my notes" (1996, 105). The language of this letter is decidedly less hostile than in other letters or his book synopsis, demonstrating that Acosta saw Thompson as both an ally and a potential enemy, one he did not relish hurting even as he tried to tell his own story: this is the essence of their combatively collaborative relationship. Whether or not those ideas truly belonged to Acosta is of course hard to tell. But the end result, in which Rinzler saw enough of a story to offer Acosta a contract of his own, hints that Acosta deserves more credit than he is typically allowed for his role in this genre of American literature, if for no other reason than that he managed to go gonzo on the publishing industry.

After decades of devoting accolades to Thompson, critics have begun to speculate about just how much each writer contributed to the development of the genre of gonzo journalism. As Bruce-Novoa describes the genre, “Gonzo journalism is the parody of the great individualist gone mad, the writer as protagonist, as central actor, as powerful voice of criticism, and as victim of the forces at play in the society at large” (1979, 43). Both Thompson and Acosta employ this parody, though they are “victims” of very different forces.<sup>12</sup> And paradoxically, they both participate in a genre that depends on collaboration, whether with other writers or the subjects of that journalism, yet highlights the individual. Thus scholarship frequently frames Thompson as the “guru” (2009c), the “godfather” (2009b) and/or the “god” (2009a) of gonzo journalism. But while earlier essays described Acosta’s work as derivative of Thompson’s, as when Raymund Paredes explains that *Revolt* is “rendered in Acosta’s version of Hunter Thompson’s ‘gonzo journalism’” (1995, 243), recent critics see Acosta as more of a collaborator than a follower. In “A Recorder of Events with a Sour Stomach,” Calderón studies Acosta’s first published novel and concludes, “Acosta should be considered an innovator in American literature, one of the early practitioners of Gonzo writing” (2004, 90–91). Shimerlee Jirón-King goes further and supports an understanding of the genesis of gonzo journalism as collaborative, “more of a synthesis of mutual influence” (2008, par. 1) between Acosta and Thompson. Wright, whose goal is to understand the intertextual linkages between the two writers, similarly argues, “Acosta’s corpus and Thompson’s corpus become strangely interdependent” (2010, 625). He claims, “Thompson and Acosta’s fictional personalities . . . strengthen each other’s projects by feeding off their reciprocal (often negative) energy” (631).

In light of the growing critical attention being paid to Acosta’s role in gonzo journalism, how did it come to be that Acosta was subordinated, nearly forgotten, and in some cases, continues to be so? By labeling him “Dr. Gonzo,” Thompson seems to suggest that Acosta—or at least the fiction Thompson developed about Acosta—is the personification, if not the archetype of “gonzo”; why, then, hasn’t Acosta maintained that synonymy over time? Just as my own essay begins with an epigraph from Thompson, it should be clear that he frequently has had control of the narrative of their relationship as well as of who Acosta was. It is in Thompson’s best—and not necessarily malicious—interest that Acosta remain neither dead nor alive, but both. And it is Thompson’s introduction that intentionally

or unintentionally confines Acosta to that liminal space, erasing many of his contributions to the genre of gonzo journalism. As Wright points out, “Thompson, as the survivor, always gets the last word in his dialogue with the dead man” (2010, 634); in this case, by deleting the controversy over Thompson’s own novel from the introductory material for Acosta’s reprinted novel, Acosta’s claims to the title of co-author, along with Acosta’s claims to the legacy of gonzo journalism, are erased. The very gaps and erasures of that introduction, which instead reads as a tribute to a nearly forgotten, literally disappeared man, rescued by Thompson yet subordinated to him, hint at just how complicated the relationship between these two writers was. Thompson concludes his introduction by calling Acosta his sidekick, “my boy, my brother, my partner in too many crimes” (1989, 7). The repetition of the word “my” emphasizes that Acosta is meaningful only in relationship to Thompson, and then only at Thompson’s will. Thus it is no surprise that the 1989 reprinting describes Acosta on the back cover of his own book as “the real-life model for Hunter S. Thompson’s ‘Dr. Gonzo.’”<sup>13</sup> That back cover also lists Acosta’s date of disappearance as 1971, not only cutting short the writer’s life but also inadvertently erasing the years during which he wrote his novels.

And the looming presence of Thompson in Acosta’s reprinted novels is mirrored by Acosta’s losing battle to be represented—in name and image—on Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* cover, a battle that continues as Thompson’s legacy is further solidified. As Gregg Barrios has pointed out, the Modern Library twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Fear and Loathing*, published in 1996, uses the same photo from the first edition as its cover photo—the one Acosta fought to have included. The only difference in this newest edition is that Acosta has been entirely cropped out of the photo.<sup>14</sup> The alteration of the photograph is a visual representation of how Acosta’s role has been downplayed, resulting in his near disappearance. Thompson’s name conditions the acceptance of Acosta back into print, but at the same time Acosta is erased from the narrative of gonzo journalism that seeks to elevate Thompson as the singular genius of the genre.

The celebration of the more marketable Thompson by the margins as well as the mainstream of American culture (as evidenced by twenty-fifth anniversary editions, major motion pictures, fan clubs, and the like) and the comparative lack of acknowledgment of Acosta is due not only to a historical narrative of the genre that shaves away

the idea of collaborative authorship, but also perhaps to a registering of the acceptable limits of outsider status: like Jack Kerouac and Tom Wolfe before him, Thompson's version of the white male outsider is more recognizable, more palatable than Acosta's.<sup>15</sup> As Jirón-King explains, "Thompson's mainstream identity and dominant-culture appeal makes it almost unavoidable that Acosta's role in the invention of the Gonzo style would be overlooked, or at the very least, considered secondary" (2008, par. 2).<sup>16</sup> In part, what Jirón-King means is that by engaging with minority discourse, Acosta's work sets him at a distance from the mainstream: to accept Acosta as gonzo is to accept the genre of gonzo as engaging with minority discourse. Given the near-erasures of both Acosta's text and the history of his collaborative relationship with Thompson, it would seem that the narrative of gonzo journalism would rather its hero be singular and its concerns not altogether removed from "mainstream"—white—America: Acosta's very existence troubles both of those requirements. Noting the similarities in Thompson's and Acosta's styles, and how both address the failure of the American Dream, Calderón focuses on how Acosta engages more clearly with race: unlike Thompson, "Acosta forces the reader to note the decidedly ethnic character of U.S. society in the sixties" (2004, 109). That portrait, of course, is mediated by forces beyond Acosta's control, forces with necessarily different visions of the shape and content of the "decidedly ethnic character" of 1960s American experience. Those forces include not only Thompson but also the publishers who produced Acosta's work at Straight Arrow Books. And the publisher's paratext, like Thompson's introductory paratext, offers further insight into Acosta's combatively collaborative relationships with the publishing world. Just as Acosta's relationship with Thompson as reflected in the introduction functions as a literary survival mechanism, so too does his relationship to Straight Arrow.

#### ACOSTA AS (NON) CHICANO: THE COCKROACH AND ETHNIC ERASURE

As a product of Straight Arrow Books, the innovative book-publishing arm of Wenner's *Rolling Stone*, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* is representative of not only Acosta's gonzo intentions but also those of a press that sought to set itself apart from the mainstream. Dian-Aziza Ooka recalls Straight Arrow as a place where it was "sort of normal" to take acid at work, a kind of microcosm of 1970s



San Francisco, but also a place “where no one else was doing what we were doing” (D. Ooka, pers. comm.).<sup>17</sup> That combination of innovation and play is seen in the use of cockroaches, both by Acosta and the text itself. In *Revolt*, which details the events of Zeta’s legal defense of a number of significant cases involving Chicanos in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Acosta’s ruminations on ethnicity implode essentialist and singular notions of identity by employing the figure of the cockroach.<sup>18</sup> In turn, the narrative emphasizes the metaphor, offering readers the visual image of cockroaches infesting the pages of the book itself. The designers at Straight Arrow Books include a graphic close-up drawing of the face of a cockroach on the cover of the first edition, and every third or fourth page of the book features line drawings of cockroaches scuttling across the corners of the page in ones, twos, and threes, peeking in from the edges. Wright, referring to Acosta’s gonzo techniques and cockroach identity in terms of “slapdash humor and . . . revisionary bricolage,” calls Acosta’s narrative techniques “ethnic playing” (2010, 629); the figures of the cockroaches themselves, comically and creepily gathering in the margins of the text, inserted by an experimental designer, suggest play as well.

But the combination of narrative and illustrated cockroaches also demonstrates another narrative thread, one not penned by Acosta but rather shaped by the interests of other players at Straight Arrow Books, much in the way Thompson’s paratextual introduction reveals his own interests. In this case, the history of the book design and production of the images on the cover and in the pages of *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* suggests that control over meaning of the cockroach, much like control over the meaning of authorship in Thompson’s introduction, is constructed and reconstructed on the page by author and editor as well as publisher and designer. In Acosta’s collaborations with both Thompson and Straight Arrow, the struggle over the power to name himself, as author, as Chicano, as cockroach, is written into the paratext. And in those combative collaborations we see Acosta’s texts (though not necessarily Acosta himself) choosing the role of sidekick, as well as of dehumanized cockroach, in order to ensure literary survival. To suggest that Acosta collaborated combatively with Straight Arrow is not to deny but rather to embrace the significant and primary role the publishing house played in bringing his story to the public; Acosta willingly and gratefully participated in such a collaboration, and without the work of editor Alan Rinzler and designer Jon Goodchild, his story

might not have appeared at all. But by calling this collaboration combative, I mean to highlight Acosta's paradoxical simultaneous reticence about sacrificing control of the story of himself and his own acknowledgment that such sacrifice is always already necessary.

In this section, broken into two parts, I examine what Marcial González describes as the, "contradictory predicament [of] forced racialization versus a self-fashioned racial identity" at play in publishing Acosta's narrative (2009, 80). I first analyze Acosta's own deployment of the cockroach, which in his narrative both problematizes a singular, essentialized definition of identity and advocates the strategic, positional, and productive uses of multiple identities in the interest of physical survival. I then argue that the cockroach, as paratextually depicted by the illustrators and designers affiliated with Straight Arrow Books, enacts a forced essentialism of the concept of the cockroach. In light of this analysis, we can read the illustrated paratext of Acosta's work as bearing out the narrative's own imperative to see the taking up of a Chicano or cockroach identity as both necessary and positional, as evidence of a combatively collaborative embrace of a singular identity in the interest of *literary* survival. Acknowledging its production history allows us to understand Acosta's work as part of a complex, collaborative, paratextual discourse with Straight Arrow Books about how to define a cockroach, a conversation shaped by the influencing forces of not only Acosta and his uneasy position in the Chicano Movement but also those who produced the images that skitter across his text. Just as Acosta aims to destabilize the essentialism at the heart of the term "Chicano," taking it up in Zeta's quest to be represented within the narrative and in Acosta's own pursuit of publication, but also alternately supplementing it with "cockroach," the material history of the book's production suggests his own combative collaboration in the production of an essentialized notion of the cockroach itself.

From the beginning of the novel, Acosta is intent on defining cockroaches as those who are reviled, who are trampled underfoot, and who survive. A cursory reading would indicate that Acosta means to equate cockroaches with Chicanos, the politically identified Mexican American population with which he frequently aligned himself (much to the chagrin of other Chicano activists). For example, in perhaps the most graphic and gut-wrenching scene in the book, Zeta describes witnessing the autopsy of a young man named Robert Fernandez following his suspicious death in a jail, noting the shame Zeta feels: "Me, I ordered those white

men to cut up the brown body of that Chicano boy, just another expendable Cockroach” (Acosta 1989, 104). But Acosta’s references to “three hundred Chicanos and other forms of Cockroaches” (12) and a description of US military firepower being used “on poor Cockroaches in far-off villages in Vietnam” (13) complicate matters: as Bruce-Novoa notes, “the Chicanos [Zeta] works with . . . are not so liberal” (1979, 47) in their use of the term. In part, because the connection between Chicano and cockroach isn’t easy—Acosta often identifies with the global poor and oppressed rather than a singular ethnic identity—he himself was dismissed by many in the Chicano Movement, a movement which in part depended on a nationalist, essentialist coherence.

Both enticed and frustrated by the Chicano Movement’s emphasis on indigenous history and mythology, Acosta’s novel depicts a nervous, positional embrace of a Chicano identity rooted in nationalist and sexist discourses. In his depiction of Zeta as he flounders toward and away from Chicano identity, Acosta opens up a space for thinking through the strengths and weaknesses of that identity. On the one hand, as Michael Hames-García argues, “[Acosta] was fully aware of the political salience of Chicano specificity” (2000, 472). But while the novel demonstrates Zeta’s involvement in the Movement—the novel includes many references, for instance, to Zeta’s desire to “get in touch with [his] Chicano soul” (Acosta 1989, 47)—many have noted the way Acosta unsettles the Movement and its terminology just as it is gaining ground. Alurista explains, “The ‘Chicano Movement,’ more specifically the ‘Chicano Student Movement,’ was at its mobilized best when Acosta appeared on the scene” (1986, 97). Ultimately, the cockroach becomes a narrative reminder of Acosta’s Chicano identity as well as his consistent and conscious subversion of it, going gonzo in its engagement of readers in the process of destabilizing identity. As Acosta depicts a character who both is and is not Chicano, on a path toward and away from that singular identity, he employs a narratively strategic essentialism that nearly mirrors the way Straight Arrow’s design has worked to essentialize the cockroach identity.

While the novel begins on a hopeful note, with Zeta claiming that he has “met [his] destiny” (Acosta 1989, 47) in the work he’s doing with the Chicano Movement, and goes on to detail his attempts to integrate himself into that Movement, by the novel’s conclusion he has once again rejected complete affinity with Chicano identity. On the one hand, he hallucinates “the lake at Chapultepec in the Valley

of Mexico . . . scanning the water for the bodies of dead Spaniards” (70) and elaborates on the history of the Chicano in America (160–61) while in the midst of defending the Tooner Flats 7, going so far as to say that he’d someday like to claim before the United Nations that “because the treaties between this government and the Mexican government were broken . . . the Mexican-American . . . is not subject to the jurisdiction of [a United States] court” (220). On the other hand, he must also chart his Chicano-ness in terms of how much or how little Spanish he’s learned over the course of the novel. Members of the Chicano Militants derisively call him a “flower child,” demonstrating his outsider status, and, seemingly half-jokingly, he claims he has “forgotten many of our tribal rites and customs” (34, 67). Furthermore, rather than seeking ethnic unity, he makes distinctions among Chicanos: those from the city, either educated or *vatos locos*, and the farmworkers. Speaking of city Chicanos, he says they “have a misconception of gringos that we farmworkers could never have. They don’t quite realize they have an enemy while, in the country, the Chicano knows from birth he is a lowdown cockroach” (67). In the end, such rhetoric is short-lived: Zeta “split[s] the Chicanos” (258) at the very end of the book, in search of self-preservation: “I’ve got to leave friends to stay whole and human, to survive intact” (258). Zeta privileges his cockroach identity over his Chicano identity.

At first it may seem that the replacement of one identity with another continues the search for a singular identity. But narratively, that cockroach identity takes on many forms as Zeta expands the definition to include a variety of “freaks.” For example, during the trial of the Tooner Flats 7, Zeta interrogates Judge Charles Older, the same judge who presided over the Charles Manson murder trial; in attendance are female Manson groupies who cheer on Zeta’s attempt to humiliate the judge. They sit directly across the aisle from “the Zeta girls,” or the female contingent of the Brown Berets, who treat Zeta “as their uncle; during the recesses, they hit [him] up for a dime for the coke machine” (Acosta 1989, 224). In contrast, the Manson girls represent sexual opportunity. But when one of the Manson girls gets too close to Zeta at the end of the trial, reaching to hug Zeta, a Chicana edges her out of the way. Zeta’s response to another friend’s derisive “she’s a *gabacha*” is one of disappointment: “I, who could have taken up Charlie’s crew of acid groupies, am to be denied their pleasures. Not that I want them, but shit! Whose life is it? Cockroach is a big word” (230).

It is this kind of scene that gets Acosta into trouble on multiple fronts, highlighting a number of reasons for Acosta's uneasy position in the Chicano canon. First, by aligning himself with a fringe or "freak" group like the Manson groupies, Zeta either at best ignores or at worst embraces Manson's promotion of racist ideology, casting doubt on Acosta's Chicano credibility. Such a choice also underscores Acosta's connection to outsiders like Thompson:<sup>19</sup> as Bruce-Novoa notes, "Acosta was ostracized by the Chicano community as a crazy, drug-taking hippie" (1979, 47). In "Banshee Screams," Thompson records "Oscar's fall from grace in the barrio" (1977, 52) in the aftermath of a drug-related arrest, claiming, "None of the respectable Chicano pols had ever liked him anyway, and that 'high speed drug bust' was all they needed to publicly denounce everything left of *buevos rancheros* and start calling themselves Mexican-American again" (49). Thompson narrates—and hyperbolizes—the end of the Chicano Movement as simultaneous with Acosta's arrest, suggesting that while Chicanos considered themselves outsiders to mainstream Anglo American culture, Acosta was even more of an outsider than they were willing to be. Gathering the Manson groupies under the umbrella of cockroach—"cockroach is a big word"—Zeta aligns himself against the Chicanos who would separate themselves from other cockroaches. That this critique of essentialist identity occurs in a gonzo text, with Acosta drawing on Anglo in addition to Chicano influences, including Thompson but also New Journalists like Truman Capote and Tom Wolfe, only further serves to potentially isolate Acosta from the Chicano Movement.

Furthermore, the misogyny of this and many other sections of the novel create unease for scholars looking to locate Acosta's work in the canon of Chicano literature. In particular, because gonzo journalism "engages in outrageous satire and the boundary between fiction and nonfiction is unclear" (Hartsock 2000, 200), some readers are unable or unwilling to separate the writer from the fictional character, labeling both Zeta and Acosta racist and misogynist.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, Frederick Luis Aldama sees Acosta's work as "a powerful maneuvering out of what has become a restrictive convention—a straitjacket—for ethnic-identified autobiographers" (2003, 64): instead of appealing to "reality," Acosta uses his narrative to confound it.<sup>21</sup> I argue Zeta represents a critique rather than a celebration of the discourses of cultural nationalism and sexism that characterize the Chicano Movement: throughout the novel, Zeta's objectification of women is inextricably linked with his own race

shame. Such shame is repeatedly narrated in the events leading up to this scene: as a child, Zeta is reprimanded by his mother for refusing to be racially segregated at his school graduation on the grounds that “they’re going to say that you’re . . . *ashamed* to march with a Mexican” (Acosta 1989, 30); she turns out to be correct. From this point he begins to be attracted to white women, “and the pattern stuck with [him]” (31) until his turn toward Chicano identity. By the time readers reach the courtroom scene, which occurs toward the end of the book, Zeta’s desires do not simply resolve into a refocused and redirected, if also blatantly misogynist, desire for Chicana women. In this scene, as in many others, Zeta both desires and denies desiring the white women—“Not that I want them” (230)—turning his own inner conflict about sexual desire, masculinity, and ethnic identity into a simultaneous protest against and support of the limitations of Chicano identity. Acosta does not entirely want to celebrate Chicanos; he problematically loves and loathes both them and himself. For better or worse, by making himself a loathsome creature—complicating the call of ethnic autobiography to narrate his “human-ness” (Aldama 2003, 64)—he makes a stable, singular Chicano identity loathsome as well.<sup>22</sup>

By juggling a variety of names for himself—Oscar, Brown Buffalo, General Zeta, Chicano, cockroach—Acosta’s text multiplies identities rather than singularizing them. In his choice of autobiography that isn’t quite autobiography, the “I”s multiply. Zeta is “simultaneously obnoxious and charismatic, repugnant and appealing, repellent and seductive, flippant and serious, self-confident and insecure, Dionysian and Apollonian” (González 2009, 98). He also expands the categories of identity to be inclusive of seemingly disparate groups. Who are the cockroaches? Chicanos, yes. When that word suits Acosta’s lawyerly or literary survival or both. But they are also the poor, the oppressed, and the gonzo freaks represented by the Manson groupies. In this case, the drawing of the Manson groupies under the heading of “cockroach” is a gonzo move, a provocative and problematic redrawing of the boundaries of identity.

Acosta’s concept of authorship is similarly complicated and multiple, both celebrating the “great individualist gone mad” and refusing the possibility of his own singular authority, much like the concept of the cockroach. He alludes to the collaborative production of the book from the very beginning by including an acknowledgments page that suggests the different points of view shaping his narrative. There, Acosta thanks editor Rinzler “for his

patience and understanding of my own personal struggle as well as that of my people,” intimating Rinzler’s role as both editorial and cultural mediator. In an interview, Rinzler describes moving from New York to San Francisco to act as the director and President of Straight Arrow with a special interest in “emerging political identities” (A. Rinzler, pers. comm.).<sup>23</sup> To that end, he had previously discovered and edited Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), an autobiographical coming of age novel set in 1940s and 1950s Harlem. But he was especially fascinated by the Chicano Movement, which made Acosta and his work appealing. In turn, Acosta’s language of gratefulness for Rinzler’s understanding “my people” identifies Rinzler as a sympathetic white outsider with an important, though different, vantage point by which he views the significance of Acosta’s narrative as part of a broader spectrum of political narratives. In later years, Acosta’s relationship with Rinzler would seem to have soured a bit, as Acosta writes in less than celebratory terms about him in his synopsis for his third book, about which he claims Rinzler would not speak to him. Rinzler, for his part, suggests the decline in Acosta’s writing and his evolution into a “self-destructive, undisciplined, angry guy” is the reason the third book did not appear (A. Rinzler, pers. comm.). Whatever the ups and downs of their relationship may have been, it’s clear that an editorial staff directed Acosta’s desire to be a writer into material results. And the shape of those results are due to the work of not only Rinzler, whose editorial hand in “polishing, restructuring, [and] pruning” brought coherence to his narrative, but also to many others involved in the publishing process (A. Rinzler, pers. comm.).<sup>24</sup>

Again, Acosta recognizes these differing intentions and celebrates them: back on the acknowledgments page, in addition to thanking Rinzler, Acosta also thanks “all the staff at Straight Arrow, particularly Jon Goodchild” (1989).<sup>25</sup> Goodchild directed the cover design and was, as Linda Gunnarson (another editor who worked on *Revolt*) describes him, a “trickster,” a man who had a “sense of humor” about publishing (L. Gunnarson, pers. comm.).<sup>26</sup> According to Gunnarson, Goodchild brought that sensibility to *Rolling Stone* and Straight Arrow Books, advancing the idea of “bookazines,” books that looked and felt like magazines. Ooka, who was hired by Goodchild to work at Straight Arrow at the age of sixteen, explains in an interview that Goodchild was “an enormously creative designer” who was given “free reign” to produce books according to his tastes (D. Ooka, pers. comm.). Referring to the choice of

cockroaches on the cover and in the pages of the book, Gunnarson says, “that’s all Jon” (L. Gunnarson, pers. comm.). Goodchild hired Frank Ansley to draw and design the cover as well as to illustrate the interior cockroach images, and Ansley’s signature is scrawled onto the shoulder of the cockroach on the cover. Ooka, who worked with Goodchild on the mechanical aspects of the production, “had to paste cockroaches all over the pages . . . [she] still dream[s] about it, in fact” (D. Ooka, pers. comm.). The design bleeds from the cover into the pages of the text, the space normally reserved for the words of the author alone, blending authorial and designer intentions. Perhaps the most telling sign of Goodchild’s controlling hand in the design of this text is this: when Ansley received a copy of the finished product, it was signed not by Acosta, but by Goodchild (F. Ansley, pers. comm.).<sup>27</sup>

And how might Goodchild have defined the cockroach? While for Rinzler, Acosta’s cockroach narrative constituted a contribution to understanding “emerging political identities,” for Goodchild, whose design work often suggested, as Martin Plimmer notes, “that the content of the text might be subordinate to the design,” Acosta’s book became a space for experimentation with images, regardless of their connections to the narrative content (1999, par. 7). As a pure design experiment, they are perhaps meant to interrupt rather than support the reading experience. What is the desired reader response? Revulsion? Confusion? Amusement? Tacit acceptance? It depends on whose desire we’re tracking: Acosta’s or Goodchild’s. In any case, the margins of Acosta’s text are shaped—with Acosta’s blessing—most visibly by the designer and illustrator.<sup>28</sup> Alongside Acosta’s narrative definitions of the cockroach, readers encounter Goodchild’s visual definitions. These illustrations also tell the story of a singular, dehumanized identity in contrast to Acosta’s narrative of multiple identities in search of redefining “humanity” itself. There are no faces on these cockroaches; in fact, according to Ansley, they are the same single illustration repeatedly placed in various positions on different pages. The drawings ask readers to recognize the book itself as a home for multiple cockroaches, though each is exactly the same. In the process of pasting identical cockroaches into the pages of an ethnic-identified text, Goodchild’s design inadvertently singularizes and entirely dehumanizes Acosta’s narrative. Reading the images alone, we can construct a narrative of a transformation of Acosta into cockroach: a singular, dehumanized identity. In fact, the back page of the original edition



does just that: it pastes an older photograph of Acosta's head onto the body of the cockroach. The material figures of the cockroaches do not comment on Chicano identity, nor the identity of the poor, the freaks, the outsiders. Instead, they singularize and essentialize the cockroach identity.

In contrast, we need only turn to Acosta's narrative of the multiplicity of his identity, his refusal to be limited by a singular identifier, as well as those final pages of the text to remind ourselves that this narrative ends with Zeta's continued struggle to "stay whole and *human*, to survive intact, to carry on the species" (1989, 258; emphasis added). How fluid is Chicano identity? How varied is cockroach identity? The narrative and the images would seem to supply different answers. But Acosta's narrative has anticipated this; in fact, his narrative seems to advocate it. By creating a character who variously takes up and sheds the identity of the Chicano, as well as, in the end, the cockroach—again, he splits to "stay whole and *human*," but he also returns to an older animal metaphor he uses for himself, "to carry on the species and my own *Buffalo* run" (258; emphasis added)—Acosta offers readers an opportunity to consider the upsides to embracing, albeit temporarily, these positional identities. In his quest to be acknowledged in Thompson's work, identifying as a "Chicano" gave Acosta a way to advocate for himself as an author, much as his journey toward and away from "Chicano" gives Zeta the opportunity to locate himself in the politics of the 1960s. And in Zeta's quest toward a broader vision of identification with the dispossessed, as well as in Acosta's quest toward publication with Straight Arrow, "cockroach" became a productive space of identification as well, in spite of, or even because of, the strategic benefits to such essentialism: physical and literary survival.

The cockroaches, much like Thompson's introduction, also serve as visible reminders of the instability of Acosta's own authorship. In a narrative that destabilizes the singularity of an essentialized Chicano identity, Acosta's own gonzo autobiographical novel insists to readers that the book itself is not the product of a singular author, a singular intention, a singular vision. In the combination of Acosta's words and the collaborative efforts of those involved at Straight Arrow Books lies the acknowledgment that Acosta's story, and by extension the story of what it means to be a Chicano (or for that matter a cockroach), can't be and isn't told by one voice. In Acosta's narratives, taking on the identity of a cockroach is a move

that resists and embraces essentialism at the same time: it broadens the scope of marginalized identity beyond the label of Chicano, and it also enables the possibility of literary survival in print, even as the definition of cockroach identity in turn is essentialized, slipping out of his grasp and into Goodchild's, not to mention the readers.' Acosta seems all too aware of this combatively collaborative process of a publishing-related "forced racialization" and "self-fashioned racial identity" even as he participates in it: in a September 1972 home video, Bob Henry tries to get Acosta to talk about his feelings on the eve of the publication of his first book. Acosta is resistant to Henry's entreaties, saying,

I did my last piece of writing on that book about three, four months ago. I feel nothing about the . . . my contribution to it. I dig, you know, I'm looking right now at Jon's part, and the printer's part, and the bookbinder's part, and the Barbara Burgower, you know everybody's part, other than my own. I keep telling ya, that . . . that's not *mine*. That belongs to all these people that worked on it.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps this is the book's most gonzo move: the material text undermines the authority of a totalizing narrative, acknowledging the book as both his and not his, a result of combative collaboration. At the same time, the evidence of this collaboration speaks to the consequences faced by ethnic-identified writers like Acosta whose authority and identity is always already in question. Acosta sets out to destabilize narratives of Chicano identity, and to argue that taking up and putting down the Chicano and the cockroach identity are means of survival, even as figures like Thompson and Goodchild destabilize his own narrative. The paratext makes this instability material, insisting to readers on the one hand that Acosta intends to multiply narratives of identity and on the other that Acosta has no control over those intentions once the interests of white writers and designers combatively collaborate with that narrative. The only way out of the fight for control over the defining of one's identity—Chicano, cockroach, or otherwise—is to collaborate, albeit combatively, with those with the power to define.

While Acosta's cockroaches may have stood for Chicanos and other oppressed minorities in 1973, from 1989 forward they also represent his personal legacy, the very book they crawl along: *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* is itself a survivor. The book is both plagued by and resistant to the threat of erasure: it represents a rebirth after nearly 20 years out of print, defiantly embracing the

image of the un-killable insect. Even the reprinting of the book itself signals both a desire to preserve the work for future generations and the lingering threat of loss and erasure: it is simultaneously a book that needs to be read and a book that not enough people want to read. And as a narrative that challenges the Chicano Movement and the stability of Chicano identity from within, it survives only in the shadows of a figure like Thompson and in pages shaped by the interests and intentions of those involved at Straight Arrow Books. The paratexts of *Revolt*—the cockroaches and the introduction—reveal the interdependent nature of Acosta’s gonzo and Chicano outsider status: the gonzo who is problematically Chicano, and the Chicano who is problematically gonzo.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Another reviewer describes *Revolt* this way: “It was a textbook . . . for a Chicano Studies class, and I thought it would be a dry, academic book. I didn’t look at the front cover close enough to see that it had a forward by none other than Hunter S. Thompson, or read the back to see that the author was the template for Thompson’s Dr. Gonzo” (Aaron 2012).

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen here to refer to the author as Acosta and, where differentiation is needed, the protagonist as Zeta.

<sup>3</sup> Critics including Tonn, Aldama, Kimberly Kowalczyk, and Paredes debate the genre of both of Acosta’s published longer works, frequently listing the factual inaccuracies and narrative flourishes that prevent them from being read as straight autobiographies. Ramón Saldívar describes Acosta’s semi-autobiographical main character as a “fictional mask” (1990, 98). As the genre of gonzo journalism has connections to New Journalism, Acosta’s work might rightly be called a nonfiction novel or “faction”; I have chosen to join Madeline Walker (2009) in describing *Revolt* as autofiction. For a thoughtful analysis of the genre of Chicana/o autobiography, see Juan Velasco (2004).

<sup>4</sup> For many readers, the conflation of Acosta with Dr. Gonzo has led to the misidentification of Acosta as Samoan. See, for example, Paul Kaihla’s interview with Thompson wherein Kaihla parenthetically describes the real-life Acosta as “the Samoan attorney” (2009c, 146).

<sup>5</sup> That he does so by using a racial epithet of his own—referring to Samoans as “waterhead South Sea mongrels”—also suggests a problematic desire to associate himself more closely with the white author as against the racialized other. Furthermore, in his first novel, Acosta narrates a number of instances in which characters ask him and he pretends to be Samoan; toward the conclusion of the novel, Acosta realizes that “the Samoan bit” (1972) is a joke he can no longer participate in.

- <sup>6</sup> Letter, Oscar Zeta Acosta to “David,” n.d., box 1, folder 24, Oscar Zeta Acosta Papers, CEMA 1, Department of Special Collections, University Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.
- <sup>7</sup> The photograph of Thompson and Acosta reproduced on the back cover can be viewed online at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Duke\\_and\\_gonzo.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Duke_and_gonzo.png). Letters between Thompson and Acosta suggest that Thompson planned to include the photo on the back of the Random House edition, after which there was some confusion when it was slated to be removed but ultimately kept (Thompson 2000). This, like many of the issues surrounding the threatened lawsuit over the book, demonstrates the conflicting stories offered by Thompson and Acosta regarding how the problem arose and was handled.
- <sup>8</sup> Alan Rinzler, in email communication with the author, April 27, 2015.
- <sup>9</sup> The introduction carries with it traces of a long and sometimes problematic history of white authors, editors, and publishers introducing and recommending ethnic American writers. Like William Lloyd Garrison’s introduction to Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* or T. S. Eliot’s introduction to Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, in Thompson’s introduction the established white author acts as the intermediary between a wider reading audience and the foreign, the unknown, the racialized writer. These paratextual introductions simultaneously insist that readers attend to these historically marginalized voices at the same time they unwittingly participate in the pattern of marginalization.
- <sup>10</sup> Letter, Oscar Zeta Acosta to Helen Brann, 1974, box 2, folder 38, Oscar Zeta Acosta Papers, CEMA 1, Department of Special Collections, University Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.
- <sup>11</sup> And though I agree with Calderón and the many other critics who wish to tread lightly concerning Acosta’s version of events, especially given his tendency toward egotism, I find it compelling that Acosta references this book in his last letter to his son Marco, where he writes, “I got myself an agent, Helen Brann of New York and Random House is interested in my next book: *The Rise and Fall of General Z*. Things are looking up” (Letter from Oscar Zeta Acosta to “Chooch,” or Marco Acosta, Jan 12, 1974, box 8, folder 1, Oscar Zeta Acosta Papers, CEMA 1. Department of Special Collections, UC Santa Barbara Library, University of California, Santa Barbara). That the established and accepted version of events also just happens to have been narrated by a celebrated egotist like Thompson suggests that we might at least consider Acosta’s version as possible.
- <sup>12</sup> Further complicating matters is the possibility of defining Acosta’s work in terms of the 1960s development in Chicano visual arts of “rasquachismo”: Tomás Ybarra-Frausto argues that “to be *rasquache* is to be down but not out (*fregado pero no jodido*). Responding to a direct relationship with the material level of existence or subsistence is what

engenders a *rasquache* attitude of survival and inventiveness” (1989, 5). Acosta’s narrative and its publishing history suggests a certain sense that Acosta was down but not out (as well as the more ribald *fregado pero no jodido*). As Amalia Mesa-Bains explains, “In its broadest sense, [*rasquache*] is a combination of resistant and resilient attitudes devised to allow the Chicano to survive and persevere with a sense of dignity” (1999). In many ways, this mode or style suits Acosta’s project as well as “gonzo”: Ybarra-Frausto notes, “the title of Zeta Acosta’s novel, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, captures the mood exactly. It was a lusty, eruptive coming to political consciousness of the dispossessed” (1989, 7).

<sup>13</sup> The new cover is illustrated by Tom Sciacca and designed by David Tran, though it preserves Ansley’s original cover in black in white—though again without credit and, according to Ansley, without permission—on one of the opening pages.

<sup>14</sup> An image of the cover of the Modern Library twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Fear and Loathing* showing the cropped photograph can be viewed online at <http://www.abebooks.com/9780679602316/Fear-Loathing-Vegas-American-Stories-0679602313/plp>.

<sup>15</sup> For two fascinating evaluations of how Acosta fits into the genre of border-crossing Beat generation outsiders, see Rachel Adams (2004) and Marci Carrasquillo (2010).

<sup>16</sup> Lionel Rolfe makes a similar move in comparing the impact of Dorothy Healey (chairwoman of the Southern California Communist Party) and Acosta on mainstream politics: “Jack Smith in the *Los Angeles Times* could and did write a long and sympathetic portrayal of Dorothy, in part because she was persuasive, charming and pretty and could be more easily portrayed in the pages of a ‘family newspaper’ than the Brown Buffalo. Oscar would have presented a much more problematic subject had Smith wanted to write about him” (2002, 59).

<sup>17</sup> Dian-Aziza Ooka (employee at Straight Arrow), in telephone conversation with the author, October 9, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> An image of the cover illustration by Frank Ansley depicting a cockroach can be viewed online at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Revolt\\_of\\_the\\_Cockroach\\_People#/media/File:TheRevoltOfTheCockroachPeople.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Revolt_of_the_Cockroach_People#/media/File:TheRevoltOfTheCockroachPeople.jpg). The cases described in the novel include Acosta’s defense of the East L.A. 13, who were involved in mass school walkouts in 1968, as well as the defense of the St. Basil 21, members of the Chicano revolt against St. Basil’s Catholic Church. He also narrates the events surrounding the Chicano Moratorium of 1970, the investigations into the deaths of Robert Fernandez and “Roland Zanzibar” (a stand-in for journalist Rubén Salazar), and the defenses of the Biltmore Six and Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales (combined in the novel as the Tooner Flats 7).

- <sup>19</sup> In an interview with Rosanna Greenstreet, Thompson listed Manson as one of two historical figures with whom he most identified, “coz he loved freedom” (1997).
- <sup>20</sup> See, for example, Paul Guajardo’s conflation of Acosta with his characters (2002).
- <sup>21</sup> Critics of Acosta like Hames-García (2000) often distance themselves from appearing to “support” the misogyny and racism inherent in such a scene in order to legitimize Acosta’s place in the Chicano canon. In his argument that the fictional characters of Acosta’s work are meant to satirize the misogynist aspects of Chicano cultural nationalism, Hames-García explains, “My goal here is not to ‘apologize’ for Acosta’s portrayals of women and of gay men but to view them from a new perspective” (474). But as Aldama has argued, this inability to separate author from protagonist comes from a long history of the expectations regarding ethnic autobiography: ethnic autobiography is seen to be “proof” of the narrating subject’s human-ness. To be ‘recognized,’ the racial and ethnic Other has had to convince his or her audience of the reality of his or her experience and, thus, adhere to narrating codes that do not call attention to the gap between mimesis and reality” (2003, 64).
- <sup>22</sup> For another analysis of Acosta’s relationship to misogyny, homophobia, and cultural nationalism, see Carl Scott Gutiérrez-Jones (1995).
- <sup>23</sup> Alan Rinzler (editor, Straight Arrow), in telephone conversation with the author, September 18, 2012.
- <sup>24</sup> The press may have inadvertently participated in cultural and racial tokenization, as another Straight Arrow employee, Barbara Ravage (previously Burgower), suggests (Barbara Ravage, in telephone conversation with the author, June 10, 2013).
- <sup>25</sup> Goodchild is also probably more well known for his design work on the English incarnation of *Oz*, a late 1960s-era social satire magazine that was innovative in its visual experimentation and “challenged the notion that clarity must be a designer’s primary concern” (Eskilson 2012, 342).
- <sup>26</sup> Linda Gunnarson (employee at Straight Arrow), in telephone conversation with the author, September 22, 2012.
- <sup>27</sup> Frank Ansley (illustrator employed by Straight Arrow), in telephone conversation with the author, October 2, 2012.
- <sup>28</sup> It is not clear whether Acosta and Goodchild had conversations about the cover or interior design, especially because while Acosta was very present both with Thompson and in his work on *Autobiography*, most of the people at Straight Arrow don’t recall Acosta being around all that much for this second book. Rinzler and Gunnarson both believe that Goodchild would most likely have had complete control over this aspect of the text, imposing his own intentions on Acosta’s book (though Acosta would likely have accepted them). Acosta’s specific acknowledgment of Goodchild,

on the other hand, potentially suggests his blessing. Furthermore, in correspondence between Neil Herring and Alan Rinzler in negotiations for this second book contract, Rinzler refers to Acosta's request that he see the cover (Letter from Alan Rinzler to Neil Herring, n.d., box 3, folder 17, Oscar Zeta Acosta Papers, CEMA 1. Department of Special Collections, UC Santa Barbara Library, University of California, Santa Barbara).

<sup>29</sup>Home video, "Bob Henry's Interview" with Oscar Zeta Acosta, 1972, Item V0503/VHS, Oscar Zeta Acosta Papers, CEMA 1. Department of Special Collections, UC Santa Barbara Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.

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