Guide to the Oscar Zeta Acosta Papers CEMA 1

Finding aid prepared by Project archivist: Salvador Güereña; principal processors: Rosemarie Leon Morales; machine-readable finding aid created by James Ryan

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1998
Title: Oscar Zeta Acosta papers
Identifier/Call Number: CEMA 1
Contributing Institution: UC Santa Barbara Library, Department of Special Collections
Language of Material: English
Physical Description: 4.0 linear feet (8 boxes)
Date (inclusive): 1936-1990
Abstract: The Oscar Zeta Acosta Collection contains material reflecting his work as a writer, lawyer and Chicano political activist. Acosta is most well known as the author of the classic Chicano books *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972), and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973). Legal Proceedings, biographical documents, correspondence, writings and photos are part of this collection. The collection takes up four linear feet, occupying eight archival boxes covering the period from 1936-1990.
Location note: Del Norte
Language of Materials: The collection is in English.
creator: Acosta, Marco
creator: Alurista
creator: Herring, Neil
creator: Thompson, Hunter S.
Conditions Governing Access note
None
Publication Rights
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Preferred Citation
[Identification of Item], Oscar Zeta Acosta Papers, CEMA 1. Department of Special Collections, UC Santa Barbara Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.
Provenance
Donated by Marco Acosta, son of Oscar Zeta Acosta, June 1989.
Processing Information note
Project archivist: Salvador Güereña; principal processors: Rosemarie Leon Morales; machine-readable finding aid created by James Ryan
Biographical Sketch
Oscar Zeta Acosta (April 8, 1935-) was a writer, lawyer, and political activist. He was born in El Paso, Texas and was raised in California's San Joaquin Valley, near Modesto. As an attorney his activities began in Oakland but it was in East Los Angeles where he gained notoriety, prior to his mysterious disappearance in Mexico in the Spring of 1974.
Acosta is most well known as the author of two of the most important novels of the Chicano Protest Movement, *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972), and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973). Both novels are highly acclaimed as major contributions to the Chicano literary renaissance. They are semiautobiographical and relate to Acosta's search for self-identity in the midst of an Anglo society at a time of great social unrest within the Chicano community.
Immediately following high school, at the age of seventeen, Acosta enlisted in the Air Force and was honorably discharged after four years of service. During a tour of service in Latin America, Acosta converted to Protestantism and became a Baptist missionary in a leper colony in Panama, although later, in *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, he rejected Christianity. Following his discharge, Acosta worked his way through Modesto Junior College, and attended San Francisco State University where he took up creative writing. After his graduation he attended San Francisco Law School at night and passed the State Bar exam in 1966. Acosta was married twice--his first wife was Betty Daves during the years 1956-1963. His second marriage was to Socorro Aguiniga from 1969-1971. As a lawyer, he first worked for the East Oakland Legal Aid Society, an antipoverty agency. Later, he moved to East Los Angeles, where he joined the Chicano Movement and generated controversy as an activist attorney during the years 1968-1973. Acosta defended various Chicano protest groups and activists such as the Saint Basil 21 and Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzalez. As an attorney, Acosta figured prominently in legal cases which addressed political, social, and educational injustices against Chicanos. He frequently clashed with the judicial
system, winning ardent supporters as well as making political enemies. He garnered respectable grass-roots support when he ran for Los Angeles County Sheriff, winning well over one hundred thousand votes.

Acosta was last heard from in May, 1974, with a telephone call from Mazatlan, Sinaloa, to his son Marco. The journalist and author Hunter S. Thompson, who was Acosta's close friend and confidante, speculated on Acosta's untimely disappearance as either a political assassination or murder at the hands of drug dealers. Acosta is presumed dead.

Scope Note
The Oscar Zeta Acosta Collection contains material reflecting his work as a writer, lawyer and Chicano political activist. The collection takes up four linear feet, occupying eight archival boxes. Most of the material was donated by Acosta's son Marco and other family members. These include items that were published after Acosta's disappearance. The collection is divided into six series, described below.

Series Description

Series I: Personal and Biographical Information, 1938-1990
This series is made up of two subseries. The first subseries is Biographical Information, 1938-1990. Among the items contained are Acosta's U.S. citizen ID card, a photo of him at two years old, school report cards, diplomas, college blue books, military records and original newscuttings about Acosta. There are also a few items pertaining to Acosta's son, Marco, for example, notification of his birth registration, a letter of recommendation for graduate school and a law school admissions essay. There is also a *Rolling Stone* article, *The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat* by Dr. Hunter S. Thompson, discussing the disappearance of his friend Oscar Zeta Acosta.

The second subseries is Personal Correspondence, 1952-1974. The outgoing correspondence from Acosta is arranged chronologically. Incoming letters to Oscar are arranged alphabetically by sender and then chronologically. When envelopes accompany correspondence, they immediately follow the corresponding letter. Included are miscellaneous letters that were not written by Acosta nor addressed to him, but that relate to Acosta. Also included in each subseries are many undated or partially dated correspondence. The correspondence is to his family members, friends and others involved with Acosta's publishing efforts. There is correspondence originating from different locations in frequented by Acosta up to the time of his disappearance.

Series II - Correspondence with Betty Daves Acosta (First Wife), 1956-1971
The majority of the letters were written during the years 1957 and 1960. These letters provide insight into the thoughts and feelings of Acosta towards his first wife and about his personal feelings about himself and his life.

Series III - Writings of Acosta, 1961-1988
Published Reviews, Articles and Newscuttings, 1972-1984 is the first of four subseries. Most are reviews and critiques of his two novels, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*. Also included is an article by Hunter S. Thompson, the writer and personal friend of Acosta, who writes about him and speculates on his disappearance.

The second subseries, Drafts, Manuscripts, Published and Unpublished, 1961-1972 is arranged chronologically and includes notes, manuscripts, short stories, poetry, and a two-act play titled, *The Catalina Papers*. Much of his writings are undated, the earliest dated short story is from 1961, a poem from 1966 and two items from 1967. Also included is a letter, dated 1964 and addressed to Wendy that turns into at least ten pages of creative writing. These were kept together as found. There is an uncorrected proof of Acosta's first novel, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) but none of his second novel. Also included are a few typed pages written by Acosta in which he describes a selfinduced hallucinogenic experience.

The third subseries is General Publishing Correspondence, 1962-1973. The series is arranged first by outgoing correspondence in chronological order, followed by incoming correspondence in alphabetical order according to sender. Miscellaneous correspondence is grouped last. This correspondence was generated by Acosta in his attempts to get his works published. In 1962, Acosta attempted to publish *Perla is a Pig* but without success. Included in this series is correspondence to and from Neil Herring, Acosta's personal friend and lawyer, who represented him and at times acted as his agent. In another letter Acosta writes to Playboy Forum, addressing the origins of "gonzo journalism," disagreeing with their interpretation.

After Oscar's disappearance, his son Marco generated correspondence in his efforts to have his father's books reprinted, prompted in part by researchers and publishers inquiring about his father's work. Included is correspondence dealing with negotiation of movie rights to *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, generated by Neil Herring after Acosta's disappearance. Correspondence with Hunter S. Thompson and Alurista are also included. This particular material forms the fourth subseries titled, Publisher Correspondence Generated with Marco Acosta, 1971-1988.

Series IV - Political and Legal Activity Files, 1963-1974

Guide to the Oscar Zeta Acosta Papers CEMA 1
This series contains material on the political activities of Acosta, the lawyer. This was a turbulent era of minority protest with the status quo and the cases Acosta was involved in addressed some of these issues. The first subseries, Legal Activity Newsclippings, 1968-1973, documents the controversy in which Acosta, in his work as a Chicano activist lawyer, was frequently involved. Included are newscuttings regarding the "East L.A. 13" and teacher, Sal Castro challenging the Los Angeles school system in his central role in the 1968 Los Angeles Unified School District blowouts, "the St. Basil 21" case dealing with Chicanos protesting the Roman Catholic church's involvement in Chicano politics, and the "Biltmore 7", a Chicano protest that turned violent. Newscuttings document Acosta's defense of Rudolfo "Corky" Gonzalez, another Chicano activist, and Acosta's challenging of the Los Angeles grand jury selection process. In all these cases, Acosta addresses the unfair underrepresentation of minorities, specifically Chicanos, in the political, judicial and educational branches of the Los Angeles government. In many of these cases, Acosta defiantly challenged the court system and as a result spent time in jail for contempt of court.

The second subseries, Legal Briefs and Miscellaneous legal notes, 1970-1973 is rather incomplete considering all the cases Acosta worked on. Included are some copies of legal documents filed in court and various handwritten notes to himself on various subjects dealing with his cases.

The third subseries, Sheriff Candidacy Material, 1970 contains a declaration of candidacy press release and a flyer with a photo of Acosta related to his bid for Los Angeles County Sheriff in 1970.

Subseries four is the FBI File, 1970-1973, in which Acosta's political activities were documented. He is listed as participating in "civil disturbances, anti-U.S. demonstrations or hostile incidents, and using "threatening or abusive statements about a U.S. or foreign official." Apparently informants kept the FBI updated of Acosta's activities. The file was finally closed on Dec. 11, 1973 but the reasons listed were censored out of the file, leaving very little information other than that there was "no information of current revolutionary activities."

The fifth subseries, Legal Correspondence, 1963-1977 contains, for example, some correspondence to and from clients, a letter written by Acosta to Judge Bush, requesting leniency on behalf of his brother, Roberto and a letter from Neil Herring representing Acosta in a legal matter. Included are two letters from Acosta's parents inquiring about conditions in Mexican jails for American citizens and legal questions about declaring their son "missing".

The sixth subseries, Last Will and Testament, 1974 written by Acosta himself, includes a personal letter to his son, dated Jan. 13, 1974. On a positive note, Acosta talks about his new agent, possibility of a new novel and explains to his son how to safeguard the will. This series takes up two boxes.

Series V - Photographs and Negatives, 1946-1989
This series is divided into three small subseries. The first subseries, Personal, 1946-1972 contains a few snapshots of Acosta as a child with other family members and a few photos as he was growing up. Most photos are undated except for a few, giving us an approximate time frame. There are photos of Acosta and friends with notes on the back indicating the characters they represent in his novels.

The second subseries, Professional is also very small, containing an original book jacket to the Random House reprint of The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo and proofs of a book jacket to The Revolt of the Cockroach People. There is a series of contact sheets taken in the early 1970s, in which Acosta strikes different poses.

The third subseries, Copy Negatives was created when the collection arrived at UCSB. Copy negatives were made for preservation purposes.

Series VI - Video, Unedited
This series presently consists of a 60-minute black and white home video in VHS format. The recording took place on September 16, 1972 at the home of Robert Henry, a friend of Acosta. Depicted are Oscar Zeta Acosta, his son Marco, Robert and Ann Henry, Irwin Segal, and Ron McClure. The video was apparently intended to be an interview of Acosta by Robert Henry on the occasion of the publication of Acosta's book, Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo. Unfortunately, there is no sense of direction and the camera largely records rambling conversations and banter of a personal nature. The 30-minute recording is unremarkable, save for a 10-minute segment where Acosta reads from his book.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Acosta, Betty Daves -- Correspondence
Acosta, Oscar Zeta
Acosta, Oscar Zeta -- Correspondence
Castro, Sal
Clippings
Correspondence
Diplomas
Lawyers -- California -- Biography
Manuscripts (for publication)
Mexican American authors -- California -- Biography
Mexican American authors -- California -- Correspondence
Mexican Americans -- California -- Biography
Mexican Americans -- California -- Correspondence
Photographs
Political activists -- California -- Correspondence
Political activists -- California -- Biography
Reviews (Criticisms)
Wills

Series I-Personal And Biographical Information 1938-1990

Biographical Information 1938-1990
Box 1, Folder 1
Citizenship I.D. Card, Grade School Report Cards and Bar Examination Admittance Card 1938-1965
Box 1, Folder 2-3
High School and Law School Diplomas 1956 and 1965
Box 1, Folder 4-6
City College Blue Books and Records 1956-1957
Box 1, Folder 7
Military Records, Withholding Tax Statement and Voter's Stub 1960-1972
Box 1, Folder 8
Biographical Information on Son, Marco 1959-1987
Box 1, Folder 32
Oakdale Joint Union High School Yearbook

Newspapers
Box 1, Folder 9-21
Newsclippings and Articles 1965-1990
Box 3, Folder 7-8
Rolling Stone article The Banshee Screams For Buffalo Meat by Dr. Hunter S. Thompson 12/15/1977

Correspondence, Outgoing 1952-1974
Box 1, Folder 22
Postcards 1952-1970
Box 1,
Correspondence 1963-1974
Folder 23-25

Correspondence, Incoming
Box 1, Folder 26
Acosta-Annie and Beeby-Dungan
Box 1, Folder 27
Gonsalves-Segal and Shmit-Wendy
Box 1, Folder 28
1967-1974 and Undated
Series II- Correspondence with Betty Daves Acosta (First Wife) 1956-1971
Box 1,
Correspondence 1956-1971
Folder 29-32
Box 2, Folder 1-12
Correspondence 1956-1971
Series III-Writings of Acosta 1961-1988
Box 2, Folder 13
Untitled Short Stories, Poems and Poems for a Spring Day 1961-1967
### General Publishing Correspondence 1962-1973

- **Box 2, Folder 14-16**
  - Untitled, Manuscript Undated

- **Box 2, Folder 17**

- **Box 2, Folder 18-19**
  - The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo, notes Undated

- **Box 2, Folder 20-24**
  - The Catalina Papers, Play Undated

- **Box 2, Folder 25**
  - David and Me Drop Acid Undated

- **Box 2, Folder 26**
  - Dear Wendy, Creative Writing Undated

- **Box 2, Folder 28**
  - Eight for the Show, Manuscript Undated

- **Box 2, Folder 28-30**
  - From Whence I Came, Manuscript Undated

- **Box 2, Folder 31**
  - The Little House, Manuscript Undated

- **Box 2, Folder 32-33**
  - Oscar Acosta, Autobiography Undated

- **Box 2, Folder 34**
  - To Whom It May Concern, Short Story Undated

- **Box 2, Folder 35**
  - The Worm Dieth Not, Short Story Undated

### General Publishing Correspondence 1962-1973

- **Box 2, Folder 36**
  - Correspondence, Out-going
  - 1962-1973
  - Undated

- **Box 2, Folder 37-39**
  - Correspondence, In-coming
  - Correspondence

- **Box 3, Folder 1-2**
  - Publisher correspondence generated with Marco Acosta 1971-1988

- **Box 3, Folder 3-5**
  - Correspondence, Out-going

### Published Reviews, Articles And Newscloppings 1971-1984

- **Box 3, Folder 6**
  - Articles
  - 1971-1974

- **Box 3, Folder 7-8**
  - 1977

- **Box 3, Folder 9**
  - 1979

- **Box 3, Folder 10**
  - 1980 and 1983

- **Box 3, Folder 11**
  - 1984

- **Box 3, Folder 12**
  - Undated

### Drafts, Manuscripts, Published And Unpublished 1961-1972

- **Box 3, Folder 13-16**
  - Correspondence, In-Coming
  - Bernal-Wenner

- **Box 3, Folder 17-21**
  - Correspondence, Miscellaneous
  - 1971-1987

### Series IV-Political and Legal Activity Files 1961-1989

- **Legal Activity Newscloppings 1968-1973**
Newspaper clippings
1968-1969

Box 3, Folder 22-24
Box 3, Folder 25-27

1970-1973

Legal transcripts and miscellaneous legal notes 1968-1979

Box 3, Folder 28-39
Box 3, Folder 40-45
Box 4, Folder 1-44
Box 5, Folder 1-43
Box 6, Folder 1-21
Box 6, Folder 22-50
Box 7, Folder 1-28
Box 7, Folder 29-32

Castro et. al v. Superior Court

The People of the State of California v. Castro et. al

The People of the State of California v. Castro et. al

The People of the State of California v. Castro et. al

People v. Montes (Biltmore 6 Trial) 1969-1979

Sheriff candidacy material 1970

Box 7, Folder 33

Sheriff candidacy material 1970

FBI file 1970-1973

Box 7, Folder 34-41

FBI file 1970-1973

Legal correspondence 1961-1977

Box 7, Folder 42

Correspondence, Out-Going
1961-1973 and undated

Box 7, Folder 43

Correspondence, In-Coming
Talamantez

Box 7, Folder 44-47

Correspondence, Miscellaneous
1963-1977

Last wills and probate petition 1973-1989

Box 8, Folder 1-22

Last wills and probate petition 1973-1989

Series V-Photographs and Negatives, 1946-1989

Box 8, Folder 23-25

Personal, 1946-1972

Box 8, Folder 26-28

Professional

Box 8, Folder 29

Copy Negatives

Series VI-Video, Unedited

Item V0503/VHS

Bob Henry's Interview September 1972
Item V6206/VHS

**Festival Flor y Canto: Reading from the revolt of the cockroach people 1974**

Other Descriptive Information

This video recording was from part of the USC/El Centro Chicano's Festival de Flor Y canto. Copyright El Centro Chicano. It includes a note from the Producer.