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A Bad Attitude and A Bad Stomach: The Soma in Oscar “Zeta” Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*

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Abstract

What does constipation and bleeding ulcers have to do with racialization? How do such ailments mark the makings of a fine writer? In this article, Fetta takes a transdisciplinary approach utilizing literary analysis, social science, and biological studies, to investigate the effects of racialization on the soma--the intelligent, communicative body-- in the Chicano activist/writer Oscar ‘Zeta’ Acosta’s masterwork *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1971). Fetta develops her theory for somatic analysis in her upcoming monograph: *Shame Hurts: Pain in Racialization Through a Somatic Lens in Latino Literature*, but in this article, Fetta specifically analyzes Oscar’s stomach as interlocutor, an intelligent entity informing Oscar’s perception of self and society. Fetta argues Oscar engages his digestive disorders in somatic protest against Oscar’s marginalization in US society. At the same time, his visceral disarray defines Oscar with the sensibility of a great Western writer

As human animals, we are living in environments that cause emotional and physiological incoherence. While we may not be able to eradicate the systems that imprison us immediately, we stand a far better chance if we don’t get tricked into thinking our struggles or the solutions to them are individual.
–Leah Harris

Constipation? How in the fuck can I be constipated when I have so much to offer?
–Oscar Zeta Acosta

Overweight, militant attorney to Chicano activists, in *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972), Oscar “Zeta” Acosta contends with his cerebral sense of self and his defiant viscera expressed in ulcers, flatulence, vomit, and yes, constipation. You see, Oscar is sick. In his autobiography (hereinafter referred to as *BB*), he frustrates to know, control, and to integrate his inner feeling to match the person he perceives himself to be. Oscar is an accomplished and eloquent man, and yet, impaired by his damaged digestive system. In a

covert aesthetic, Acosta positions Oscar's stomach as a central source of autobiographical expression in tension with Oscar's experience of self.

Health care practitioners suppose jurisdiction over Oscar, compartmentalizing Oscar's innards as disease while pathologizing Oscar's self-image. Medical doctors claiming to see into his body, assign him diagnoses, attributing his suffering to the problem of Oscar's individual body: "Who can say for sure what causes ulcers? At the age of twenty-one, six (6) doctors showed me pictures of what they claimed were holes in my stomach. Perhaps it really is a physical thing. . ." (*BB*, 2). Dr. Serbin, Oscar's psychiatrist, who appears as an internalized voice heard inside Oscar's head, derides Oscar's feigned ignorance of core issues of sex and race, what we might understand today as gendered racialization (*BB*, 19-25). But his ailing thirty-three-year old brown body¹ impedes Oscar's social ascension. And as an interlocutor, his physical condition presents a nagging envoy marking the effects of social marginalization. Acosta posits Oscar's body as sentient expresser to come to terms with his life under gendered racialization, *BB*'s central conflict of a man racialized Mexican, circa 1930s-60s.

While dialogue and self-reflection indicate his social marginalization, Oscar's bad stomach most clearly conveys the destructive impact of intersectional social inscription. Despite Oscar's successes in education and civil service, Oscar feels himself somewhat of a failure, a condition social science research has established common to people-assigned-color who suffer from racialization and racism regularly and over the course of their lives (Carter; Sanchez-Hucles and Dryden; Utsey, Giesbrecht, Hook and Standard, 49-62):²

Racial stratification and systemic racism have been and continue to be endemic and ingrained in all aspects of American life: in customs, laws, and traditions. . . . Perhaps a major contributing factor to the problem of racism and its impact on the mental health of its targets is a failure to clearly understand the emotional, psychological, and, to some extent, physical effects of racism on its targets. (Carter, 13-14)

Perhaps then it should not surprise us that Oscar present himself as a foiled assimilationist. Oscar narrates his successful fulfilment of cultural scripts where his Christian religiosity, hard work, education, athletic prowess, civic commitment, and heteronormativity should bring him into the fold of Americanness. Yet, he is continually treated with disabuse and at best, as a less-than American. *Brown Buffalo* delivers a personal accounting of how systemic

racialization produces incessant socially marginalize, and thus *traumatizes* those it colors. And this account Oscar most squarely depicts via his stomach. The stomach provides clear, visceral evidence against egalitarian suppositions of American manhood, manifesting the effects of socially manufactured trauma of racialization and racism.

The autobiography narrates a four-day cross-country misadventure where Oscar abandons his job as attorney for a San Francisco legal aid office to take to the road. In a frenzied narrative style, the majority of *BB* logs Oscar's self-abuse, reckless actions, and chance social encounters. Though some readers (and scholars) may be intrigued or dissuaded by the aesthetics, the embodied aesthetic innovatively registers racial trauma. Oscar's stomach chronicles injustice against the promises of meritocracy and social mobility while the style untethers Oscar from autobiography's demand for narrative coherence to instead portray the profound psycho-physiological effects of phenotype in US society.³ His unusual somatic aesthetic recuperates a degree of sovereignty over his personhood and thus should be considered a critical stratagem, an odd form of realism to present his life.

More of an escape than an intended quest, Oscar finds a degree of self-acceptance in naming himself a brown buffalo of the book title, an animal slaughtered for sport in near genocidal fashion during the late 1800s and early 1900s in the US. Although clearly an autobiography of resistance, the narrative more persuasively marks his despair—the despair of living as a suspect and oftentimes despised gendered and racialized being in the US, an undesirable citizen of the world's self-proclaimed great democracy.

Situating Oscar's Gut

Because Oscar's stomach affectively centers his despair, I begin by arguing digestive sentience is a somatic expression of Oscar's interior subjectivity. The body's interior is expressive of Oscar's personhood, and recounts the stomach's prominence in European intellectual history. Tracing the story of the stomach that circulated in early modern physiology, the gut finds its way in beliefs regarding creativity. Of the many ways the stomach factored into notions of health, the most pertinent to my project are the continental letters correlates the state of the stomach to one's intellectual refinement. Acosta's employ of Oscar's stomach leads with these cultural histories to challenge racial and class suppositions tying the somatic stomach to the intellect. As I will argue, Acosta's depiction of Oscar as *malheureux*, an intellectual despite his social standing, suffering from a bad stomach and a

bad attitude, unexpectedly positions Oscar in the lineage of great Western authors. At the same time, the somatic voice of a bad stomach pressures awareness of the contingencies of racialization, gender, and class underlying such a consecration. In effect, the somatic stomach aestheticizes the trauma of intersectional racialization responsible for blocking Oscar's sense of belonging.

The term *soma* from the Greek usage signifies the intelligent, communicative body thought in different traditions to contain or manifest one's spirit, a presence usually separated from intellectual activity, but that is often associated with emotional life. I employ *soma* following this etymological lineage because the term gives me a way to access the body as a perceiving, communicative entity that grounds one's experience *of* the world *in* the world. Here, I continue exploring the function and content of the soma and its role in racialization that I have begun in other venues, to focus on the stomach as the primary somatic ground for other levels of Oscar's subjectivity.⁴ Oscar's viscera urgently informs Oscar (as well as the reader) of how he experiences trauma outside of his mental machinations disaffected in dialogic exchanges and interior thought. The autobiography likewise structures the simple plot of a four-day cross-country trip where, instead of a grand quest, Oscar takes to the road aimlessly, physically imbibing, regurgitating, and expelling the trauma he lives out.⁵ He intersperses these actions with somatic reaction where his body--principally his stomach--marks his physiological health as a response to what Oscar socially experiences. By drawing the communicative value of Oscar as organism, Acosta subverts the convention of the coherent autobiographical talking head for a racially traumatized "I" bounded by Oscar's emotional distress and gaseous stomach.

His gut punctuates the mock in the autobiographical heroic from the start: "I sit on the bowl and face myself in the mirror above the sink. An outrageously angry face stares me down and I laugh at the sight of a Brown Buffalo sitting on his throne" (*BB*,12). Hence, from the second page, Oscar tries to physically expel physical feelings he identifies as nausea for emotional feelings of inadequacy based on his gendered and racialized physical unattractiveness: "I strain to vomit, pushing upward with my diaphragm, with as total control of the belly as any good clarinet player could have...but nothing comes except gurgling convulsions from down under" (*BB*, 12).

On a physical level, Oscar grows sick from the upset caused by denigrating attorneys and judges who disparage his work as a public defender in San Francisco. Collegial rejection

and the job's hollow promise of helping his underemployed, largely female clientele motivates Oscar to throw his law certificate in the trash and take to the road:

Right about now my stomach reminds me of my clients sitting in the dingy waiting room of the Legal Aid Society at Fourteenth and Fruitvale in the slums of East Oakland. It's already fifteen to nine. Already they've waiting to devour me as they have each day for the past twelve months. (*BB*, 18)

Thus, in the first dozen pages, Oscar stakes out social scripts that define how life in the United States of America has thwarted his efforts for acclaim, his contributions to society, and his longing for social acceptance. His soma expresses society's failing of him across these three very American cultural tropes. In stark contrast to the cocky, irreverent persona he publicly dons, his digestion reveals how he truly manages his work and civic lives, his romantic affairs and his friendships:

“I hold my breath too long ... Grumbling and convulsions in the empty pit. ...I stare into the repository of all that is unacceptable and wait for the green bile, my sunbaked face where my big, brown ass will soon sit.”

“Puke, you sonofabitch! [sic]” I command. “Aren't you the world champion pukerupper (sic)?”

“Jesus Christ, not even my body obeys me anymore!” (*BB*, 11-12)

Oscar's body imposes itself effectively against Oscar's wishes. As we read in the second epigraph, Acosta inducts the reader into Oscar's internalized self-view from the perspective of his racially coded physical disarray that Oscar believes he should be able to control. Literary scholar Genaro Padilla refers to Oscar's malaise of the culturally-adrift where “[o]nly by denying and rejecting some elemental part of the self can the Chicano's relationship with America prove to be propitious, and, even then, propitious only in the eyes of the self-deluding protagonists” (249). Oscar's bad stomach presents a sufferance willful Oscar tries to manage, an internal discord paralleling Oscar's inability to socially inhabit the powerful man he believes himself to be, and by many measures, effectively is.

But who is Oscar talking to in the above passage? Oscar's exchange with his body renders his stomach as plausible interlocutor, characterized by its obstinacy. Given autobiography is a literary tradition which presumes a rational writing subject, he uniquely treats his body as subjective entity with whom Oscar must contend. A Cartesian disembodied “I”, disinterested in the life of the body typical in conventional US

autobiography, Oscar writes unapologetically of the physical ramifications of intersectional racialized self-loathing and so mocks the unicity of the psychological “I” as hero of his own story.

For some readers, such description falls into the ludic or the grotesque,⁶ or may incur the brand of literary bad taste (usually misnamed as playing the race card, disbelief, claim of author’s hypersensitivity or exaggeration). These analyses of *BB* cohere in recognizing Acosta’s intentional destabilization of the autobiographical voice as transparent, factual, under the artifice of personal truth. Where autobiographical subjects are depicted as minds with dominion over their bodies, somatic expression is an aesthetic continuation of the hyperbolic emphasis on phenotype per racialization, a counterpoint to the pressured conformity to autobiographical norms. Thus, stylizing Oscar’s stomach as interlocutor may appear gratuitous but less so when we consider this aesthetic decision manifests the predicament of gendered and racialized subjection.

The political efficacy of somatic expression becomes somewhat obscure alongside dialogue and interior thought written largely under the influence of alcohol and drugs that at times make the text difficult to follow. The figure of the addicted “I” is not new to autobiography or to other genres but in other cases, a clear-headed looking back situates time-while-inebriated in accessible terms (e.g., *Junky* (1953), *Go Ask Alice* (1971)). In *BB*, the dominance of imbibed narrations and somatic expression intentionally frustrate easy comprehension, a distancing mode that allows deviation from generic expectations (Hyvärinen, et al., 9) that expose the difficulties of generically telling his life of gendered racialization. Engaging in erratic oftentimes almost nonsensical verbal expressions, Oscar speaks to others and to himself with judgmental perceptions of manhood, heteronormativity, middle-class membership, and racial schemes, all of which he himself feels he fails and more importantly, have failed him. Usually decontextualized, the focus on bodily description tends to minimize dialogue making the following passage appear fanciful:

Maryjane reaches over and begins to stuff raspberry sherbet into the yellow lard under my belly button. . . . She takes my huge brown head ready for mounting and holds it in her arms like the Madonna. She puts her mouth full of emerald lips over my nose. She sucks on it to save my life. My green snot puffs her face and fills it up like a carnival balloon. With her eyes against mine, she sucks and sucks until finally my head collapses like a rubber ball

stuck with a dart. My shriveled face is thrown among the stale stogies on the floor. Black boots kick at me and the blood pours red carpets. (*BB*, 63-64)

This scene portrays Oscar and his friends under the influence of narcotics to be sure, but his altered state still includes his self-view—mounted brown head like a buffalo—, positioning his bodily fluids as medium for sociality. The solicitation of green snot is a euphemism for his ailing body as are the seminal fluids from fellatio performed on him. The scene ends in a joyless ejaculation where his pleasure is eclipsed by the collapse of his head-cum-penis, converted suddenly into detritus on par with the used-up cigars strewn on the floor. The last sentence of the passage concludes the sexual scene’s inscription in racialized interactions where black boots (suggestive of combat gear) physically assault Oscar, leaving him bleeding and humiliated.

This self-presentation collapses Oscar as engaged sex partner to a bizarre object to be used and discarded, underscoring the way the body centralizes much of the text. Further, the expressive soma challenges the assumption of consensual sex and while still physically stimulating, the soma’s reaction remarks racialized affront and degradation. His cranium and the factions of the mind become the head of his penis creating a disturbing scene where the choice of narrative style evinces this experience as sadomasochistic or perhaps abusive. His composite head collapses in gendered racialization, and with it, his desired social position as subject. The decision to represent Oscar’s internalization of society’s view of him through fellatio performed on his unusually small, brown genitalia,⁷ is an aesthetic decision where “bodies at the margins of national norms seem to provide a conduit to insights”:

This quality of seeming both more real and more otherworldly than the quotidian social world suggests just one of the complexities of representing physical difference and its figural burden . . . offering the tropes by which [bodies] become legible in the national imaginary.” (Russell, 59-60)⁸

The deliberate focus on the body may seem curious if not bizarre but when understood as an ethical representation of society’s exaggerated imbrication of Oscar as brown body, the strangeness of the aesthetic indicates ingenuity of approach.

Oscar’s material body socially circulates while his organic innards emote, relaying a level of subjectivity registered in the response of his body as soma. Thus, Oscar’s contentious experience of and relationship to his body relays as much a personal situation as a socially induced struggle. Oscar’s race, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnic assignments

categorize him as bad-because-intersectionally brown, attributing some kind of immutable impropriety to his existence and denoting a priori forfeiture of the social benefits from his mastery of social scripts. As such, Oscar's individual accomplishments derive Oscar's social failures leading to self-abuse and ultimately, a bad stomach in critique of US racism.

Oscar not only suffers social marginalization, he internalizes social rejection in the form of self-alienation. As a child, school authorities' dismissal of Oscar and other Chicano students' schoolyard talents are denied recognition via the chastisement they receive for speaking Spanish at school. When Oscar and his Chicano classmates win a game of football against a group of Anglo-Euro boys on the playground, the Anglo-Euro boys call foul play. Their reason: Oscar and his team directed their strategy in Spanish. The grammar school principal weighs in and warns Oscar he will be punished if he continues to speak Spanish during class or on the playground. From this experience of racialization, young Oscar decides to stop speaking Spanish or listening to Mexican music all together. As Oscar assumes their social rejection of him, he identifies his ethnicity as a barrier to esteeming his talents and that of his Chicano friends (*BB*, 186). Instead of cultivating esteem from his peers and school officials, success on the playground leads to the threat of expulsion and fortifies his social exclusion.

Over the course of the text, Oscar structurally intimates the similarity of power relations involved in this event to many other events over the course of his life. In numerous scenes of racialization, individual achievement garners social diminishment then expressed in his escalating stomach illness and his increasing cynicism. Towards the end of the text, Oscar holds the fantastic belief that Mexican women would cure his ulcers and his heart. After visiting El Paso, Texas, his home town, Oscar decides to cross the border to Juárez when he is suddenly overcome with desire for the Mexican women he sees: "My heart ached to speak with any of these women. I knew they had the answer to my pain. If only I could speak whatever language I could muster, I was certain they'd give me the cure for my ailing stomach, my ulcers and the blood in the toilet" (*BB*, 189). In earnestness, Oscar fantasizes bodily rehabilitation through the emotional and sexual experience of romantic love.

After an extended tryst with two Mexican sex workers, Oscar feels himself "a serious Mexican [man] for the first time" in his life (*BB*, 190), extending the feeling of social acceptance to the promise of physical healing. But alas, his ultimate rejection by Mexicans frustrates his reconciliation on both fronts. Landing in a Mexican jail, he stands in front of a

Mexican judge who admonishes: “Why don’t you go home and learn to speak your father’s tongue?” (*BB*, 194). Repeated in a Mexican context, Oscar ties his social incongruity as society’s disavowal of him. The Juárez adventure debunks the fantasy of belonging to either US or Mexican cultures, a poignant critique of the narrow and false possibility of satisfying social scripts in exchange for social acceptance for those racialized Chican@. Thus, in both the US and Mexican contexts, *BB* asks the reader to first understand society’s role in fomenting individual illness (and wellness); second, to broaden our notion of the body as site of organic illness (or wellness) in service to the mind and the body; to third, appreciate the body’s role as profound interlocutor expressing self, interpreting others, and as a biological entity refracting social conditions.

Stomach As Somatic Bridge

The fact is, in the West, from the pre-modern period until the twentieth century, the stomach *has been* argued in relation to the mind. From humorology to modern medical nomenclature, the stomach has been the center of notions of health in the West. Greek physician Galen of Pergamum (CE 129-216) argued digestion was an “integral aspect to the maintenance of humoral balance” (Miller citing Galen, 7), a position that influenced medical theory from the Middle Ages until the seventeenth century (Nutton). Later, in the medieval period, the stomach diminished in cultural esteem, and became the site of appetites that conflicted with spiritual goodness (Miller, 7). Seventeenth-century Jan Baptist Van Helmont went so far as to argue the stomach as the site of the soul, thus motivating his study of digestion and bodily disorders (Miller, 7). An organ that both emits and receives, the gut makes us uniquely aware of what it wants, needs and feels, a position found in recent scientific studies asserting the stomach’s responsiveness to the quality of our physical lives but also of our psychosocial experiences (“The Brain-Gut Connection”). This brief overview points to long-standing scientific and popular fascination and almost preoccupation with the stomach where the stomach as producer of key excretions influenced one’s health but also one’s character.

We may be unaccustomed to the term *soma*, but we are more familiar with popular ways we refer to the stomach as a source of inner knowing. A second brain of sorts found in idiomatic expressions like “I had a gut feeling,” we hold the stomach as the physical location of intuition. Most recently, Western studies confirm the intelligence of the stomach as

scientific fact. An organ with the number of brain cells equivalent in number to a cat's brain, our "little brain", a non-scientific term referring to the *enteric nervous system* (ENS) is "not so little. The ENS is two thin layers of more than 100 million nerve cells lining your gastrointestinal tract from esophagus to rectum" ("The Brain-Gut Connection").⁹ These nerve cells allow the digestive system to function as a center of intelligence, receiving and sending messages that relay information about internal and external stimuli to and from our brains.

A primary expresser of emotions, a hub essential for life energy, and an intuitive force present beyond the (disembodied) intellect, this visceral knower appears to be more than a myth or an obscure belief. The gut is "just as large and chemically complex as the gray matter in our heads" (Enders, 125). In fact, the brain and the gut are together the engines of our human intelligence: "Scientists have found evidence of what many of us already suspected: our brains and our guts 'talk' to each other. In fact, they are so intimately connected that some believe the gut and the brain should be viewed as part of one system" (Paddock).

Before such scientific reports, the intelligent stomach may have seemed almost romantic to a 21st century reader, but European intellectual history shows creativity and intellectualism have been argued in relation to the stomach for centuries. In particular, the 18th-century idea of the stomach was as a kind of subjectivity. At that time, the stomach was thought to react to and work with the mind. In fact, the stomach was said to affect one's lifestyle, ethics, morality, and intellectual ability. Different from other organs, the stomach specifies wants and dislikes with food, responds to physical activity, as well as to sexual and intellectual activities. Théophile de Bordeu, the renowned vitalist physician of the mid-18th century regarded the stomach "not just as part of 'the triumvirate of life' but also as a dynamic organ that possessed animal intuition, its own distinct tastes and distastes, and the capacity to play a significant role in most illnesses" (Miller, 95).

During that time, it was thought that when one carried out one's life well, one's satisfaction evidenced in "good bowels" or a "good stomach." As Ian Miller notes in *A Modern History of the Stomach*, the stomach "appeared...to occupy a central and persistent position in the development of key fields of medicine including physical anatomy, physiology, surgery and psychosomatic medicine" such that "[e]ven at the peak of reductionist medicine at the start of the twentieth century, it proved hard to convince both

the public and medical professionals that approaches to the [stomach] which neglected the complex interaction of body and mind were entirely accurate” (2).¹⁰

In addition to knowledge and self-fashioning, recent research shows the stomach actually plays a role in the production and communication of emotions: “all those neurons lining our digestive system allow it to keep in close contact with the brain in your skull, via the vagus nerves, which often influence our emotional state” (Mosley). In fact, research attests emotions and the stomach work both ways: what we eat may influence our emotions and what we feel emotionally affects our stomach (“The Brain-Gut Connection”). From the beginning of *BB*, Oscar correlates what he ingests with *who* he is and *how* he is--spicy, overbearing, and seeking domination:

I analyze my medical condition. It's true I refused the advice of all six doctors. For Christ's sake, I was only twenty-one. What value is a life without booze and Mexican food? Can you just imagine me drinking two quarts of milk every day for the rest of my life? They said, 'nothing hot or cold, nothing spicy and absolutely nothing alcoholic.' Shit, I couldn't be bland if my life depended on it. (*BB*, 12)

As Christopher E. Forth and Ana Carden-Coyne explain for hundreds of years “the digestive and appetitive dimensions of the abdomen have been inextricable from our concepts of the embodied self” (7) that, in purview of *BB*, holds cadence as a system of self made up of the material, social, and psychological ingestion, digestion, and expulsion. Current research reports the stomach maintains the integrity of both properties: food and the psychological/mental are forces interacting on and through us, a somatic specificity of the digestive system. From mouth to rectum, the system’s many parts respond to what is ingested, react to digestion, and can wreck havoc in protest during excretion.¹¹

What ails Oscar in *BB*, medieval doctors would have called a person’s individual humoral constitution, but recent research attributes many chronic digestive problems to the psychological impact of social stress on individuals and on the gut in particular. Historically, it was believed that a person physically taxed the organism by excessive intellectual activity, emotionality, physical inactivity, and/or poor food, was a strain the stomach expressed in the form of constipation, a nervous stomach, and other digestive troubles. Forth and Carden-Coyne argue this supposition continues in an inverse mode where people discipline their bodies in order to alleviate or ameliorate their mental sense of self: “Techniques of the self,

then, have clearly persisted in our modern ways of approaching our food, our appetites, and our bodies. The steps we take to feed, manage and sculpt our bellies have been intimately connected with who we are and what we wish to be” (7). Additionally, the sociocultural inscription of the digestive system adds coordinates to racializing schemes as we see in recent critique of ethnicizing disease such as obesity and diabetes as prevalent among the Latin@ population (“Hispanics and Heart Disease, Stroke,” Lopez). Such diseases revitalize the imagistic connection between the stomach and marginalized subject position where historically, “the stomach's primary importance stems from the fact that it played a central role in mapping and maintaining the gendered, class-based, and ethnic social hierarchies of early modern culture” (Purnis, 800), and in which *BB* inscribes Oscar’s bad stomach. This brief review of the cultural history of the stomach in the West contextualizes today’s scientific findings, presenting the stomach as a vital constituent of human experience that in *BB* informs Oscar’s subjectivity.

Racialized Trauma and The Stomach

Because race-based traumatic stress “is a potential predictor of emotional abusiveness and trauma . . .levied by those in society with more power against those with less power” (Sanchez-Hucles and Dryden, 511), racialization burdens Oscar’s materiality. The soma registering physical ill health coextensive with intense emotional discomfort of his socially-inscribed delimited subjectivity is not unique to Oscar. Psychological studies indicate racism-induced trauma widespread, confirmed by 89% to 91% of racialized minorities surveyed stating: “racism is linked to . . . societal trauma, intergenerational trauma, racist incident-based trauma, insidious trauma, psychological trauma, and emotional abusiveness” (511), such that in 2007, psychological researcher Robert T. Carter forcefully argued: “a key notion associated with . . . definitions of racism is the emphasis on personal character rather than on systemic processes” (20). To the point of systemic racism over personal character, Oscar’s detailed scenes of racialization deliver to the reader the effects of subjection motivated by a racist system that “overlook[s] the fact that the group in power defines what is acceptable and what is not” (21), the system thusly chastising Oscar and Latin@s by extension without ever needing to consider its motivation or process.¹²

As critical theorists Sara Ahmed, José Esteban Muñoz, and a growing body of medical researchers argue, sustained states of emotional discomfort accrue over time,

creating a cumulative effect on the body and on the mind.¹³ From a literary standpoint, this social practice and predicament of racial trauma develops the stomach in the largely long ago past-tense genre of autobiography into an aesthetic of moment-by-moment presence, effectively delineating an urgent sense of the chronological present: “[t]he possibility of a memory of trauma, of an unbroken account of its history, disappears in the hypnotic-suggestive knots that tie trauma to an interminable repetitious present tense” (Orr 21). Oscar’s stomach becomes particularly prescient as a form of subjectivity that speaks each moment to the effects of his early childhood intersectional racist traumas. Whereas present micro-aggressions can be easily misread as something other than the intricate tapestry of social practices imbuing another with racialization, their cumulative, deeply felt effects recover in Oscar’s expressive stomach.¹⁴

Studies show racist encounters engender feelings of disrespect, anger, insult, disappointment, frustration, outrage, hurt, and shock and contribute to long-term emotional distress (Landrine, Klonoff, Carter, and Forsyth, 512) that become physical:

the severity or chronicity of the stressor and the ensuing physiological response systems can cause damage, exacerbate existing disease processes, or predispose the individual to . . . become maladaptive . . . particularly true in situations [where] . . . the ability to adapt has already been altered due to genetic or early life events, thereby biasing an individual's susceptibility to the negative effects of stress throughout life. (Mayer 861)¹⁵

Ulcers, flatulence, and vomiting collapse socially-scripted divisions between inner states and outside behavior as *BB*'s somatic aesthetic where Oscar feels and expresses the effects of his unequal American life. Unstymied by the autobiographical “I”’s reproach, Oscar’s body could be mistaken as his alter ego in its rebuke of Oscar’s decisions, both emotional and physical.¹⁶ While a productive argument, to view Oscar’s presentation of his body as only his alter ego minimizes the political efficacy of Acosta’s artistic use of the soma. From a narrative perspective, “traumatic ‘experience’ breaks into and breaks open the bounded subject or ‘self’” (Leys, 32), such that fronting his stomach as somatic interlocutor effectively allows feeling to inform and transmit his racialized trauma to the reader.

I will argue Oscar’s somatic stomach renders his unquestionable cultural sophistication at the same time his digestive disorders express racialized trauma. As Acosta biographer Ilán Stavans argues, racial exclusion was Acosta’s intellectual and political *raison*

d'être (54) *and* a primary cause for multiple nervous breakdowns (23, 34, 44). In fact, literary scholar Héctor Calderón identifies the beginning of Oscar's stomach problems the night he was forced to separate from his Anglo-Euro girlfriend Alice Brown by command of Alice's racist parents and racist local police: "The convulsions down under began that night. The wretched vomit, the gas laden belly formed within my pit when the chief of police asked me if I understood. Savvy?" (*BB*, 119-20).

Ethnic minorities experiencing racism must cope with the psychological sequelae stemming from the destruction of basic beliefs in safety, meaning and personhood. Jones and Jones in 1987 labeled the results of racial trauma as a form of long term emotional abuse, a "perpetrator-less crime", and deemed to be among the worst acts U.S. society practices against its own citizens (qtd. in Sánchez-Hucles 74). This oftentimes perpetrator-less crime is precisely what sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues as color-blind racism. Bonilla-Silva's influential text outlines a contemporary map of the entrenched nature of racism where individual racists or isolated racist acts are no longer necessary to conduct racism. Social institutions and practices of all kinds are increasingly cloaked in verbiage misdirecting racism into isolated penurious acts, the foibles befallen on an unlucky individual, and/or the consequences of colorless poverty and drug-addiction, limited intelligence, or wanting work ethic.

In addition to psychologically deleterious childhood events where Oscar reveals racist verbal and physical attacks, Oscar's descriptions of his present troubles are dotted with overtones demonstrative of intersectional racism, racialization, and their impact. In like manner, literary scenes of racialization deftly present racial outings, racially motivated interpersonal rejections, and professional prejudice. Notably, Oscar does not employ the term *racism* to describe the psychosocial practice operating in scenes of racialization. The absence of the term in *BB* aesthetically demarcates the ubiquity of the practice that most often goes unnamed. Quotidian scenes of racialization appear alongside these earlier traumatizing moments that, over the course of the text, intercalate with the interminable narrative present offered by his stomach.

The Intellectual Stomachache

Acosta's inner physical turmoil is never *only* about physical malaise. And a bad stomach and a bad attitude write Oscar out of the Cartesian split and into an aesthetic that

corporealizes the devastating effects racialization and racism mete out to Latin@s.¹⁷ Curiously, such a connection also authenticates Oscar's intellectual prowess. The long European trajectory of intellectual thought positions the sensitive stomach as a sign of refinement. While the effects of social stress are well documented,¹⁸ the stomach is hardly an arbitrary marker in English for the stomach is an organ long understood in the West on par and in relation to the mind: "The human stomach is an organ endowed by nature...forming a centre of sympathy between our corporeal and mental parts, of more exquisite qualifications than even the brain itself" states Scottish physician Thomas Trotter in his 1808 study *A View of the Nervous Temperament* (203).

And much earlier, in the fourth century CE, treatises on physiognomy based on Polemon's notions found in the *Book of Physiognomy* sometimes proposed the size and shape of the belly as indicative of one's moral character, where the bodily protrusion itself made certain moral aptitudes more or less probable (Hill, 79). And much later, the organicist concept of stomach replaces the physical dimensions of bellies as thinkers and even contemporary artists articulate connections between stomach, emotions, and mind: "Pure intellect without feelings is impotent and even potentially dangerous (i.e., the computer in the hands of those who wish to control)" while "[e]xpressionism ([identified with the] stomach) without intellect is pointless and usually boring" (Haring, 114). Thus, the connection between feelings, the stomach, and creativity extends to established cultural traditions of intellectualism and the stomach as site of feeling. More recently, Bryan Waterman reasons in *Republic of Intellect: The Friendly Club of New York City and the Making of American Literature*, "the stomach is the organ of the greatest sympathy with the brain as is observed in the sudden loss of appetite ...by the arrival of joyful or afflicting intelligence" (213), a relation well-documented in Oscar's reports of alcohol and drug use, his psychological state, and the state of his innards may motivate disbelief in Oscar's ability to write the next great American novel (*BB*, 100).

What he ingests and his mental state however, situates Oscar in a genealogy of writers, a *homme de lettres*, who, like his literary predecessors, is overtly challenged by his stomach. Indeed, the bad stomach abides as a kind of physical hallmark of the true intellectual. Writers such as Coleridge, Voltaire, and Rousseau among others regularly wrote of their battles to stay healthy by attempting to regulate the working of their stomachs.¹⁹ Oscar, in *simpatico*, bars the trope of the delicate stomach of the exquisite mind: "I speak

as a historian, a recorder of events with a sour stomach. I have no love for memories of the past. Ginsberg and those coffee houses with hungry-looking guitar players never did mean shit to me. They never took their drinking seriously” (*BB*, 18). If the stomach integrates Oscar into the sensibilities of the great writer, then it also mocks this possibility in light of the racialization he suffers. Oscar, the international traveler who holds multiple university degrees, and who has studied literary luminaries, demonstrates his considerable cultural acumen in the way he writes. References to contemporaries exhibits knowledge of the Beats,²⁰ and 20th century Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, but *BB*’s project also evinces a self-fashioning that perhaps builds on Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau, and the grit of urban strife for people of color in autobiographies by Piri Thomas (1967), Dick Gregory (1964), Richard Wright (1945), and Claude Brown (1965).²¹

Structurally, he waits until page 100 to reveal his literary goals he tucks into anecdotes of having rubbed elbows with the day’s literary luminaries. Chance meetings introduce Oscar to Richard Dettering, (the co-editor with S. I. Hayakawa of the magazine *ETC.*), who in turn presents Oscar to acclaimed writers like Van Tilburg Clark, Mark Harris, and Herb Gold congregated in San Francisco at that time. It was Dettering who convinced Oscar to write: “Little did he know I was scared shitless of all those guys with tweed coats and fancy pipes” who he now belittles in hindsight: “[t]hese guys weren’t the world famous fags they are today” (*BB*, 100). After becoming a literary mentee of this group, Harris asks Oscar to read his latest novel *Wake Up, Stupid!* where upon reading the first paragraph, Oscar proclaims, “I was no longer afraid of the intellectuals. I knew I could tell a better story” (*BB*, 100), proving Paul Guajardo’s point, Acosta sees himself first and foremost as a writer (56-57). And besides, as Stavans argues, “[Acosta] enjoyed being repulsive . . . Who else but him to champion a vision of victory through repulsion?” (13). From his insides out, Oscar’s stomach makes him at once refined enough to write the next great American novel while simultaneously presenting Oscar as pitiable, a mock hero, in inimical response to the unequal social standing for those racialized brown.²²

Conclusion

When a citizen with an embodied difference enters the public sphere, that body becomes the determining force of their belonging.

–Emily Russell

This surprising focus on Oscar's somatic stomach binds Acosta's text to the predicament of living a life conditioned by his brown male body. An indifferent reader, apathetic towards or simply unschooled in issues of racialization, conditioned to value sentimentality, or inured to rhetoric of transcendence would not expect to read of the inner disagreeable workings of the autobiographical "I"'s somatic body or body-based self-loathing. Yet, the soma enters as interlocutor in Oscar's self-presentation asserting the adverse psychosocial and physical effects of patriarchy, racism, and class prejudice. The aches, groans, and eliminations prompted by his guts not only responds to oppressive social practices, they protest Oscar's internationalization of them; they register his elemental dissent, and they prompt him (if not impel him) to find a source of nurturance and self-acceptance.

Hence, towards the end of the autobiography, Oscar's Mexican love cure is only temporarily successful. He declares himself finally "a real Mexican man," when he really asserts a sense of intersectional belonging that he anticipates should heal his bad attitude *and* his bad stomach. But Oscar is thrown in a Mexican jail and later chastised for his inept *mexicanidad* by a Mexican judge. While he does not mention his stomach for the remaining few pages of the text, he learns his newfound ethnicized manhood is as provisional and contingent as the ostensibly pleasurable orgasms it is derived from. Likely, his Mexican love cure for his stomach was similarly ephemeral.²³

Oscar presents himself as a failed assimilationist, where despite fulfilling cultural mandates for acceptability in the forms of Christian religiosity, hard work, education, sport, writing, civic commitment, and heteronormativity, Oscar is never socially received. Instead of directly critiquing cultural hegemony and its cultural scripts that barter social approval, Oscar intercalates a drug-induced narrative style with a somatic aesthetic, physically and subjectively responding to society's deep commitment to racialized schemes so traumatic,

they make Oscar sick. Oscar brokers self-acceptance by recognizing the physical impact of racialization in the accounts his stomach tells, alerting the reader to the intersectional effects of socially-manufactured racial trauma that, at the same time, *BB* instantiate Oscar as a great American writer.

Notes

¹ As Frederick L. Aldama has researched, Acosta was 36 at the time of writing *BB* but deliberately chose to represent himself at the age of 33 to more closely connect Oscar's likeness to Jesus Christ (65). By such discrepancies, Acosta engages in a "self-reflective technique to call attention to the artifice of the narrative as an invented story and to hold up a fun-house mirror to society" (54)

² Utsey et al.: "Race-related stress was a significantly more powerful risk factor than stressful life events for psychological distress" (49). See Mangold, Wand, Javors, and Mintz's 2010 study "Acculturation, Childhood Trauma and the Cortisol Awakening Response in Mexican American Adults" for related findings of early trauma and acculturation in Hispanic subjects.

³ Juan Bruce-Novoa argues against understanding *BB* as chaotic; Bruce-Novoa argues "[t]hat Gonzo fiction becomes a metaphor for the chaos of the American Dream" (43) and Acosta writes with typical irony and vivid narrative "but not chaotically" (45).

⁴ See the upcoming monograph tentatively titled *Shame Hurts: Racialization in Latin@ Literature through a Somatic Lens* under review.

⁵ His only rule: no map, no set destination (*BB*, 103).

⁶ Michael Hames-García argues for reading *BB* through the carnivalesque lens where Acosta writes Oscar and his world according to an aesthetic where social orders are upset. See "Dr. Gonzo's Carnival: The Testimonial Satires of Oscar Zeta Acosta".

⁷ Oscar mentions what he believes to be a particularly small penis several times in *BB*. Although it could be factual, this rendering most likely physicalizes his diminished social power in metaphor.

⁸ We cannot equate able-bodiedness with racialization, nor can we disregard experiential commonalities that elucidate the work of the soma in *BB*. See "Ethnic and Mainstream Social Connectedness, Perceived Racial Discrimination, and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms" (Wei, et al.).

⁹ Jay Pasricha, M.D., director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Neurogastroenterology, whose research on the enteric nervous system has garnered international attention: "The enteric nervous system doesn't seem capable of thought as we know it, but it communicates back and forth with our big brain—with profound results" ("The Brain-Gut Connection").

¹⁰ Miller states "The complexities and debates surrounding the stomach remain with us today" (*ibid*: 2). For further information, see Selye's 1950 article "Stress and General Adaptation Syndrome;" Chrousos and Gold's 1992 study "The Concepts of Stress and Stress System Disorders: Overview of Physical and Behavioral Homeostasis;" and Chrousos, Loriaux, and Gold's 1988 "The Concept of Stress and its Historical Development".

¹¹ A similar argument could have been made about the respiratory system. The nose and lungs comprise an organ that also ingests, responds, and expels in a very responsive fashion. The aleatory has been shown to be one of human's strongest indicators of harm, while breathing reacts quickly in somatic fashion to internal and external stressors. Because oxygen is more critical to human life than food, it would seem the respiratory system would have had a bigger role in the development of biology.

¹² "Scenes of racialization" specify a sequence of human interactions that stratify two or more interlocutors into a racializer-dominant and a racialized-subordinate. This social stratification is conducted through racial shaming explored in further detail in *Shame Hurts: Racialization in Latin@ Literature through a Somatic Lens* (tentatively titled) forthcoming from the Ohio State University Press.

¹³ For example, see "Interpersonal Discrimination and Depressive Symptomatology: Examination of Several Personality-related Characteristics as Potential Confounders in a Racial/Ethnic Heterogeneous Adult Sample" by Haslyn, et al.

¹⁴ Studies repeatedly illustrate links between stress and trauma affecting the stomach in developing conditions like ulcers, gastrointestinal disorders, and other digestive maladies (R. Stamm, LMA Akkermans, and VM Wiegant, 704-709).

¹⁵ For a more in depth analysis, see Eley and Plomin's 1997 study "Genetic Analysis of Emotionality". See Ladd, Huot, and Thirvikraman's 2000 article "Long-term Behavioral and Neuroendocrine Adaptations to Adverse Early Experience" in *The Biological Basis for Mind Body Interactions*.

¹⁶ Acosta is frequently referred to as the gonzo alter ego of Hunter S. Thompson, a charge Acosta strongly contested. Indeed, Acosta made legal entreaty for recognition of his co-creation of the endeavor and style (Stavans, 96-104).

¹⁷ Scholar Héctor Calderón's work classifies *BB* a satire where the gonzo journalistic style effectively "distorts and create caricature...to reject the limitations of novelistic discourse and capture a broad sequential representation of social and cultural life in the United States" (106-08).

¹⁸ These long term effects of the organism's accommodation to certain types of stress have been referred to as allostatic load (McEwen, 1998) the "wear and tear" resulting from chronic over-activity or underactivity of physiological stress response systems. Stressors associated with such maladaptive consequences, both acute and chronic, are referred to in this review as *pathological* stressors. The outcome of pathological stress on the patient is determined not only by the duration, severity, and type of stressor, but also by other factors, such as genetics, early life experiences, cognitive factors, and environmental support.

¹⁷ The delicacy of the stomach also seems to be a mark of good character, a finer sensibility of the righteous. Voltaire remarks on the gluttony of the upper class where excess is the sought-after experience that foregoes the exquisiteness of taste. Voltaire considers gluttony when coupled with linguistic barb equally rapid. Voltaire surmises the upper class either doesn't care how their conduct affects their stomachs or, because they are of an inferior category of human being, their stomachs do not register the excess or the lack of character as it does for Voltaire (Forth and Carden-Coyn, 96-98).

²⁰ Interestingly, professor of philosophy Linda Martín Alcoff identifies the Beats' cultural disconnection as "the most famous attempt to escape from whiteness through a self-presentation of sensibilities that they characterized as non-white" (169). Like in the case of Jack Kerouac who finds cultural patrons in African-American and Mexican culture, the Beats effectuate white double-consciousness where they are aware of (and dissatisfied with) their ascription of whiteness (136-77).

²¹ Acosta may have been affected by the counterculture literary scene in Mexico circa 1960s and 70s influencing other prominent Chicano writers. Dramaturge Luis Valdez and Teatro Campesino are performing in Mexico while Chicano novelists Alejandro Morales, Miguel Méndez, and Rolando Smith Hinojosa are among an emerging group of Chicano writers published and recognized by Latin American institutions beginning in the early 1970s. Ilán Stavans argues whereas Acosta may have had knowledge of his literary Mexican contemporaries; those writers had no knowledge of Acosta (54).

²² Centering the reader on Oscar's body from the autobiography's first page, first *sentence*: "I stand naked before the mirror" (*BB*, 11) to nearly the last: "I stand before the mirror. I cry in sobs" (*BB*, 195) effectively exposes the process and effects of racialization in the making of Latin@s, however some readers consider Acosta's fat, flatulent Oscar a testimonial form of Mikhail Bakhtin's *grotesque* (See Hames-García's well argued "Dr. Gonzo's Carnival: The Testimonial Satires of Oscar Zeta Acosta" (2000)), I point to the soma as an intelligent, expressive and responsive entity in the substantive form of human subjectivity. Acosta writes somatic Oscar reflecting the historical subject's numerous health challenges documented in *Oscar "Zeta" Acosta: The Uncollected Works* (Stavans, 1995) at the same time the narrated soma serves literary purposes of poking holes in the autobiographical hero.

²³ In his 1973 sequel, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, Acosta reasserts his troubles with his stomach.

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