

University of California, Santa Barbara
Davidson Library
Department of Special Collections
California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives

**GUIDE TO THE
ACOSTA, OSCAR ZETA PAPERS,
1936-1990**

Collection Number: CEMA 1

Size Collection: 3 linear feet (7 boxes).

Acquisition Information: Donated by Marco Acosta, son of Oscar Zeta Acosta, June 1989.

Access restrictions: None.

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Location: Del Norte.

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Publication Rights: Copyright resides with donor

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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 three linear feet, occupying seven 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 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 here are Acosta's U.S. citizen ID card, with a photo of him at two years old, school report cards, diplomas, college blue books, military records and original newspaper clippings about Acosta. Included are 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.

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 Mexico that Acosta frequented up to the time of his disappearance. This series takes up one archival box.

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. This series takes up one box.

Series III Writings of Acosta. *Published Reviews, Articles and Newsclippings*, 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 self-induced 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. 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 newsclippings regarding the "East L.A. 13" and teacher, Sal Castro challenging the Los Angeles school system, "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. Newsclippings 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 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 hand-written 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 a 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, 1947-1989. 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 *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and proofs of a book jacket to *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.

CONTAINER LISTING

SERIES I-PERSONAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION, 1938-1990

Box	Folder	Contents
		Biographical Information, 1938-1990
1	1	Citizenship I.D. Card, Grade School Report and Bar
1		Examination Admittance Card, 1938-1965
1	2	High School and Law School Diplomas, 1956-1965
1	3	City College Blue Books and Records, 1956-1957
1	4	Military Records, Withholding Tax Statement and voter's Stub, 1960-1972
		Newsclippings
1	5	1965-1966
1	6-7	1971
1	8	1972
1	9	1973-1990
1	10	n.d.
1	11	Biographical Information on son, Marco, 1959-1987
		Personal Correspondence, 1952-1974
1	12	Postcards, Out-Going, 1952-1970
1		Correspondence, Out-Going
1	13	1963-1967
1	14	1968-1972
1	15	1973-1974
1	16-18	n.d.
1		Correspondence, In-Coming
1	19	Acosta-Annie
1	20	Beeby-Dungan
1	21	Gonsalves-Segal
1	22	Shmit-Wendy
1	23	1967-1974
1	24	n.d.

SERIES II-CORRESPONDENCE WITH BETTY DAVES ACOSTA (FIRST WIFE), 1956-1971

		Correspondence
1	25	1956
1	26-28	1957
2	1	1957
2	2	1958 (includes photo of Oscar, n.d.)
2	3	1959
2	4-8	1960
2	9	1961-1965
2	10	1967-1971
2	11-16	n.d.

SERIES III-WRITINGS OF ACOSTA, 1961-1988

Box	Folder	Contents
		Published Reviews, Articles and Newsclippings, 1971-1984
2	17	1971-1974
2	18	1977
2	19	1979
2	20	1980
2	21	1983
2	22	1984
2	23	n.d.
		Drafts, Manuscripts, Published and Unpublished, 1961-1972
2	24	Untitled, Short Stories, 1961-1967
2	25	Untitled, Poems, n.d.-1967
2	26	<i>Poems for a Spring Day</i> , 1966
2	27	Untitled, Manuscript, n.d.
3	1	<i>The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo</i> , Notes, n.d.
3	2-3	<i>The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo</i> , Uncorrected Proof, n.d.
3	4	<i>The Catalina Papers</i> , Play, n.d.
3	5	<i>David and Me Drop Acid</i> , n.d.
3	6	<i>Dear Wendy</i> , Creative Writing, n.d.
3	7	<i>Eight for the Show</i> , Manuscript, n.d.
3	8	<i>From Whence I Came</i> , Manuscript, n.d.
3	9	<i>The Little House</i> , Manuscript, n.d.
3	10	<i>Oscar Acosta</i> , Autobiography, n.d.
3	11	<i>To Whom It May Concern</i> , Short Story, n.d.
3	12	<i>The Worm Dieth Not</i> , Short Story, n.d.
		General Publishing Correspondence, 1962-1973
		Correspondence, Out Going
3	13	1962-1973
3	14	n.d.
		Correspondence, In-Coming
3	15	Barbara-Talamantez
		Correspondence, Miscellaneous
3	16	1972
		Publisher Correspondence Generated with Marco Acosta, 1971-1988
		Correspondence, Out Going
3	17	1986-1988
		Correspondence, In-Coming
3	18	Bernal-Wenner
		Correspondence, Miscellaneous
3	19	1971-1987

SERIES IV-POLITICAL AND LEGAL ACTIVITY FILES, 1961-1989

Box	Folder	Contents
		Legal Activity Newsclippings, 1968-1973
3	20	1968-1969
4	1	1970-1973
		Legal Transcripts and Miscellaneous Legal Notes, 1968-1979
		People v. Castro (East L.A. 13) 1968-1969
4	2-3	Grand Jury Proceeding
4	4-7	Defense Pleadings
4	8	Prosecutors Pleadings
4	9	Counts, Indictment & Warrant
5	1	Witnesses, Latino Grand Jury, Exhibits, Misc.
5	2-3	Trial Transcript
5	4-5	Trial Transcript (cont.)
6	1	Trial Transcript (cont.)
6	2-3	Castro v. Superior Court (Appeal in People v. Castro) 1970-1971
6	4	People v. Montes (Biltmore 6 Trial) 1969-1972
6	5	People v. Montes (Biltmore 6 Trial) cont.
6	6-7	People v. Montes (Montes Trial) 1977-1979
6	8	Miscellaneous Legal Notes, n.d.
6	9	Sheriff Candidacy Material, 1970
		FBI File, 1970-1973
7	1	FBI File, 1970-1973
		Legal Correspondence 1961-1977
		Correspondence, Out Going
7	2	1961-1973
7	3	n.d.
7	4	Correspondence, In-Coming Talamantez
7	5	Correspondence, Miscellaneous 1963-1977
		Last Wills and Probate Petition, 1973-1989
7	6-7	Last Wills and Probate Petition, 1973-1989

SERIES V-PHOTOGRAPHS AND NEGATIVES, 1946-1989

7	8	Personal, family photos 1946-1972
7	9	Publicity stills and artwork for publishers
7	10	Copy Negatives, misc

SERIES VI-VIDEO, UNEDITED

V0503/VHS	CEMA 1 Acosta (Oscar Zeta) Interview, September, 1972
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