The word *brown* in my title refers to the hazy in-between space of Chicano culture within the racial economies of the United States. Historically, Anglos have had difficulty assigning Chicanos a role in various Manichaean allegories of racial difference. Chicanos have at times been positioned in the middle of white/black hierarchies, as in the racist rhyme “If you’re white you’re all right, if you’re brown stick around, if you’re black get back.” At other times, brown falls between red and white. The Mexicano of frontier lore, for example, is neither noble savage nor civilized European but rather a corrupt combination of the worst qualities of both.1 *Brown* thus becomes part of a scatological vocabulary that marks Chicanos as matter out of place. Contemporary efforts to police the border between Mexico and the United States represent only the most recent attempts to inscribe boundaries around and through brown populations. Ironically, anti-immigrant hysteria finds its complement in attempts to make elements of brown culture safe for Anglo consumption. An American diet of meat and potatoes has been supplemented with carne asada and tortilla chips. Salsa has partially displaced ketchup as the contemporary condiment of choice, perhaps becoming one of the few things that define a common U.S. culture. I can imagine a time in the near future when the traditional American feast becomes a day of thanksgiving for a meal of “authentic Mexican food” without Mexicans.2

Whereas dominant Anglo culture has repressed and appropriated brownness, various Anglo cultural productions have emerged through violent confrontations with certain distinctly Chicano styles. The term “brown style” here describes a critical discourse that simultaneously counters Anglo repressions, opposes the white supremacist assumptions of highbrow taste, and affirms the qualities of Chicano difference.

The lowrider engine powering my analysis is the Chicano singer Freddy Fender. Fender achieved national celebrity in the mid-1970s with a string of weepy Tex-Mex ballads. His renditions of “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights,” “Before the Next Teardrop Falls,” and “Vaya con Dios” were all top-ten hits on both country and pop charts. More recently, Fender has launched a new career with a band called the Texas Tornados, which includes the esteemed *conjunto* accordionist Flaco Jiménez. Despite his success on the country charts, we might wonder at Fender’s seemingly

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1 Curtis Marez. 
2 Curtis Marez.
awkward fit within a musical genre characterized by songs such as “Red Neck, White Socks, and Blue Ribbon Beer.” In what universe, we might ask, is it possible for a tejano to rub brown elbows with good old boys and okies from Muskogee? To account for the apparently oxymoronic phrase Chicano country-and-western star, I will initially turn to Fender’s performances in the recent noir-western _Rush_ (1991). Although _Rush_ attempts to enlist Fender’s voice in the service of dominant Anglo narratives, Fender’s role in _Rush_ makes possible a series of intertextual echoes in excess of the film’s central frame. Cranking up the volume of Fender’s voice in this way will allow me to analyze the singer’s performance of Chicano style as a mode of resistance to white supremacist constructions of racial difference. From this discussion of Fender’s music I move toward a theory of style among contemporary working-class Chicanos.

**The Rush of Brownness; or, “Home on the Range” Meets “El Rancho Grande”**

_Rush_ focuses on two undercover drug agents, Raynor (Jason Patric) and Kristen (Jennifer Jason Leigh), and their efforts to bust bar owner and suspected drug dealer Will Gaines (Greg Allman). At first glance the film hardly seems a promising place to begin an analysis of brown style. Although the film is set in southern Texas, an area of the United States with a large brown population, it contains only one minor Chicano character, “the Wino,” as he is called in the credits. Fender does not even appear in the film—his performance consists of two songs on the soundtrack. Moreover, the songs—“Before the Next Teardrop Falls” and “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights”—were not even written or recorded for the film. Fender’s music is (more or less) confined to two scenes in two cowboy bars. From a certain perspective, his hits from the 1970s merely provide local color and period feel. In this regard, they are indistinguishable from the rest of the music in _Rush_, which includes Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Free Bird” and Johnny Winter’s “Rock and Roll Hoochie Koo.” In effect, the film has abstracted Fender from the present and relegated him to an artifactual past, where he persists in a sort of vague half-life. Still, in a soundtrack dominated by seventies “Southern rock,” Fender stands out like a brown thumb. ¿Qué pasa, ese? What are you doing in a cowboy cantina?

To answer this question, we must reconsider the cross-cultural genealogy of the “American” cowboy. Américo Paredes has argued that one result of contact between Anglos and Chicanos along the border has been the “blending of Anglo-American culture with that of the northern Mexican _ranchero_.” According to Paredes, the image of the American
cowboy implies a complicated history of cross-cultural borrowings, begin-
ning when Anglos took on the qualities of the Mexican ranchero or vaquero, added the famous six-shooter, and became cowboys. As Paredes contends, the Anglo cowboy actually first discovered what we now think of as machismo by adding the revolver to the vaquero image. For the border Mexican, the word cowboy originally designated the Anglo cattle thieves who raided the Nueces–Rio Grande area in the late 1830s, and who, revolver in hand, began to dispossess the Mexicans on the north bank of the Rio Grande. Understandably, the border Mexican developed a fasci-
nation for the revolver as a very potent symbol of power; he had learned
the power of the pistol the hard way. Thus, while Mexicans lent the image
of the vaquero to their neighbors to the north, the image returned to
Mexico wearing a six-shooter and a Stetson. The cowboy macho image
influenced the Mexican Revolution, but it was after the revolution that the
cycle was completed, with the singing charros of the Mexican movies.
And it was at about this same time that anthropologists and psychoana-
lysts discovered machismo in Mexico and labeled it a peculiarly Mexican
way of behavior.4

If the cowboy is one of America’s most eroticized national icons, his
appeal in part derives from Anglo contact with Chicanos. From Tom Mix
to the Village People, the cowboy is sexy because he has rubbed up
against otherness. As a figure who often violently traverses the boundary
between different races and cultures, the cowboy carries the erotic charge
characteristic of various forms of transgression. While the cowboy’s lin-
eage has largely been obscured, a brown reading of Rush makes the traces
of this occulted history visible.

From a Chicano perspective, however, the western-wear Anglo, espe-
cially the Texas Ranger, is the enemy—never mind that he has copped his
style from brown people. Throughout his work, Paredes has argued that in
numerous folk songs or corridos, Chicanos have celebrated the brown man
who opposes the rinches (Rangers) “with a pistol in his hand.” In such
songs the Rangers are often too cowardly to confront the Chicano alone,
and the corrido hero often taunts the authorities for sending so many
Rangers for just one Mexican. While references to such border conflicts
are highly muted in Rush, they can nonetheless be detected, most notably
in the brief scene between a Chicano and Gaines, the suspected drug
dealer. In the opening minutes of the film, the camera follows Gaines as
he drives down a dark country road. When Gaines reaches into the back-
seat and feels a bottle and then a man’s black beard, he quickly pulls over
and drags a sleeping Chicano out of the back seat. The credits identify
this character as the Wino, played by Tom Rosales. When the Wino says,
“Hey man, I just want in out of the cold,” Gaines responds, “You came
real close this time, Pancho.” The film’s opening gambit, its hook, is the

The Politics of Working-Class Chicano Style
barely veiled fantasy of a racially coded carjacking. The dramatic effectiveness of the scene depends on a willingness to imagine a brown invasion of white male “personal space,” in this case the car. Gaines’s lines in this scene have a double meaning that underlines my reading: Pancho came close to being killed by Gaines and Pancho became too intimate, too “close this time.” Here and elsewhere, *Rush* promises viewers the vicarious pleasures of cross-racial friction, conflict, penetration. Even the name “Pancho” is significant in this regard. As Paredes notes, when used as a derisive, generic name for Chicanos, “Pancho suggests the bandit stereotype, the Mexican with the long mustaches and the cartridge belts crossed over his chest.” In other words, the name calls to mind a stereotyped image of the brown border combatant.

And yet *Rush* reneges on a part of what it seems to pledge. We might, for example, expect the scene to end with a shot of the Wino, Tom Rosales, beaten into a brown pulp. The film sidesteps this potential beating as if to cover up the acts of representational violence that have rendered the southern Texas scene relatively Chicano-free.

**Fender Bending**

*Rush* cannot, however, completely cover its tracks. The film may quickly eject Pancho, but brown sounds continue to reverberate on the soundtrack. Thus the most remarkable representative of border culture in *Rush* remains Freddy Fender.

Fender was born on 4 June 1937 in a barrio in San Benito, Texas, to two migrant farm workers who named him Baldemar Huerta. While working with his parents and eight siblings during the agricultural seasons, Fender learned to play a broken-backed, three-string guitar. After the eighth grade in 1954, he dropped out of school and joined the Marines (three years later being discharged for bad conduct). As a civilian, Fender formed a band and began playing at working-class Chicano dances and Texas beer joints. When he started recording on local labels, his Spanish-language songs were hits in both Texas and Mexico. His popular Spanish rendition of “Devil in Disguise” (*Diablo con Antifaz*) helped earn him the title “the Chicano Elvis.” In 1959, Fender recorded the first version of his first big hit, “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights,” a song he also co-wrote. In 1960, however, his career hit a brick wall when he was arrested for possessing a small amount of marijuana. He went on to serve a three-year sentence in the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola.

Fender’s early hardships were to have a profound effect on his life and art. “In my youth,” according to Fender, “I was always afraid of hunger, always afraid of not paying the rent, afraid of the cops, afraid my wife
would leave me.” \textit{La pinta} literally left its mark on him—Fender has an ugly scar on his neck from a knife wound he received while serving his sentence. As he recalls, “Prison for me was like a burial cemetery.” When he began recording hit tunes in the mid-1970s, Fender’s prison past became an integral part of his public image. I can remember, for example, Fender discussing prison at great length on his regular visits to the Merv Griffin Show. The pains of prison surely had an effect on his music, especially in what he calls his “born loser” songs. Fender explains his singing style in the following manner:

I absorb punishment and it makes me very sad. . . . Instead of feeling bitter against whatever is causing this punishment, whether it is society or my situation or whatever, I get real sad and put it into my songs. . . . I have no monopoly on struggling or suffering and there’s millions of people we’ll never know about going through hell out there. I can reach them through my music.\footnote{6}

Indeed, one can hear both punishment and intense, almost visceral despair in the majority of his work. His public persona, with its history of poverty and prison, helps explain his popularity among Chicanos and, I might add, white working-class country fans.

During the celebration of the American bicentennial, Fender had a string of hits. Because many of his songs were bilingual, they were popular with English- and Spanish-speaking listeners. For instance, his version of the old Nashville song “Before the Next Teardrop Falls” was originally intended for a Spanish-speaking market but quickly became a number-one hit on both the country and pop charts (as of 1975, it had sold over 1.5 million copies). His re-recording of “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights” was also a hit on both charts, as were the bilingual tunes “Vaya con Dios,” “Since I Met You Baby,” and “Secret Love.” His cross-cultural appeal has garnered him a Grammy, a Country Music Association Award, and a Golden Eagle Award from Nosotros, an organization of Chicano entertainers.

Like his collection of awards, Fender’s repertoire is a mixed bag, borrowed from a variety of musical traditions. He has recorded versions of songs in all of the following genres: country (“Wild Side of Life” and “Silver Wings”), rhythm and blues (“Ain’t That a Shame”), pop (“Roses Are Red”), and folk (“Ramona”). In each case, Fender sings in both English and Spanish. Stylistically, his music is quite eclectic, combining elements of 1950s rock and roll, rhythm and blues, and country, as well as \textit{conjunto} (a style of accordion music popular among Texan-Americans). His songs about lost or unrequited love, combined with his highly emotive, tremulous phrasing, suggest comparison with both \textit{canción romántica} and honky-tonk styles. Fender’s work thus reflects the cultural hybridity characteristic of his working-class southwestern origins.
We must remember . . .

that Tex-Mex hybridity is not a happy melting-pot resolution of differences, nor is it a sort of stylistic pluralism. More often than not, cross-cultural mixtures in the Southwest are the outcome of violent struggles, and Fender is no exception to this rule. On the level of biography, his stint in prison suggests traditions of racist justice in the South and Southwest. While there is no official evidence to indicate that Fender's arrest and conviction were racially motivated, most Chicanos know the score—you don't want to be anywhere near drugs in Louisiana if you're brown.

Freddy Fender's music expresses this pain of racial oppression. Roland Barthes suggests that "the grain of the voice" is "the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue . . . the volume of the speaking and singing voice, the space in which the significations germinate 'from within language and in its very materiality.'"? But what if the body isn't speaking its "mother tongue?" Fender's voice often manifests the awkward catches characteristic of a Chicano singing in English. For lack of a better word, we might say that the grain in his voice is accented. This accent registers the material conditions of linguistic colonialism in Texas, where educators and employers insisted that Spanish speakers learn English. At times one can almost feel the pressure of linguistic assimilation in Fender's songs. A good example is his interpretation of "You'll Lose a Good Thing." In other versions, the chorus receives colloquial phrasing—"If you lose me, oh yeah, you'll lose a good thing." Fender's version is slightly different—"If you lose me, oh yes, you'll lose a good thing." Here "yeah" becomes "yes," with a distinctly enunciated "s." The distinction is subtle but important, indicating that Fender at times overcorrects his pronunciation of a language in which he may feel less than secure.

Lyrically, Freddy Fender's songs concern the abject, or, in Fender's words, the "born losers." In my reading, these losers are also born brown and poor. This does not mean that his music documents in a straightforward fashion life in the barrio, or that Fender self-consciously enunciates a political program. On the contrary, the majority of his songs are "about" romantic pain—lost, unrequited, or faithless love. Nonetheless, even apparently apolitical songs often have a political content. For example, Manuel Peña notes that in post-1950 tejano music, statements about poverty were often interwoven with the love theme, as in 'No me quieres porque soy pobre' ("You don't love me because I'm poor"). Such statements are common in Fender's work, as in "How Are Things with You?" where the singer encounters a former lover who scorns his faded jeans and well-worn boots. Given that tejano poverty is largely the result of structural racism, such laments obliquely refer to problems of race relations. Peña
further concludes that we can interpret the “cruel, fickle woman, so bit-
terly denounced in many of these songs, and alcohol, so ready at hand, as
symbols that scapegoat for social and economic oppression.” Fender’s
ongoing interest in such concerns helps mark his race and class positions,
as well as those of his working-class Chicano audience.

Fender’s rendition of “The Wild Side of Life” exemplifies the sym-
monic response to oppression that Peña describes. Although originally a
country-and-western tune, Fender’s bilingual interpretation transforms it
into a Chicano narrative. The song is the lament of a man whose wife has
left him to return to a life of drinking and dancing. As the chorus explains:

I didn’t know God made honky-tonk angels
And I might have known you’d never make a wife.
You gave up the only one that ever loved you
And went back to the wild side of life.

In this song Fender nostalgically mourns a lost way of life, here figured by
marriage. Fender’s version of “The Wild Side of Life” is part of a long
tradition of patriarchal reactions to seemingly more permissive Anglo gen-
der roles. As Ámérico Paredes and others suggest, Chicanos have often
registered the perceived effects of border conflict by arguing that an
immoral white culture poses a grave threat to female virtue. In my read-
ing, then, “The Wild Side of Life” when performed by Freddy Fender
becomes a song of border conflict waged across the Chicana’s body: the
distinction between the good wife and the honky-tonk angel comes
to signify the differences between brown and white cultures. Fender
makes such differences concrete by singing the song both in English and
Spanish.

But as Peña points out, as long as the treacherous women in such
songs are held immediately responsible for Chicano dispossession, oblique
gestures of resistance such as Fender’s “Wild Side of Life” remain a form
of scapegoating. The faithless women in Fender’s music all recall the
patriarchal cautionary tale of La Malintzin (or La Malinche), the Aztec
woman who supposedly betrayed her people to the Spanish. Malintzin
was a noble woman presented to Cortés on his arrival at Veracruz in
1510. She eventually became Cortés’s lover, translator, and adviser, and
she is accused (by both Mexicans and Chicanos) of opening the door to
Spanish conquest in the New World. “The pervasiveness of the myth,”
writes Norma Alarcón, “is unfathomable, often permeating and suffusing
our very being without conscious awareness.” As performed by a Chicano,
even a seemingly generic version of the faithless-woman motif can suggest
the Malintzin myth.

Thus when Fender interprets “The Wild Side of Life” he transforms
it into a patriarchal Chicano-Catholic allegory about proper and improper
spaces for women. By giving up “the only one that ever loved [her],” the woman of the song trades the home for the honky-tonk or cantina. The germ of the narrative is contained in the oxymoronic (within the logic of the song) phrase “honky-tonk angels,” indicating that a Chicana who leaves the domestic sphere becomes, like Satan, a fallen angel. In “You Can’t Get Here from There,” Fender opposes the home and the honky-tonk just as starkly:

I knew when the phone rang, it was you again.
You’re out there somewhere crying, and you need a friend.
I hear a jukebox playing in a honky-tonk somewhere.
You’re wanting to come home again, but you can’t get here from there. . . .
You want a home and family, but you want your night time flair.
You’re wanting to come home again, but you can’t get here from there.

Here Fender contrasts the cantina and el rancho grande, the Chicano counterpart to a (white) man’s castle. The title of a Fender tune about a barmaid succinctly tells a similar story: “That Girl Who Waits on Tables Used to Wait for Me at Home.” With these songs Fender seems to pine for a world before the fall into Anglo permissiveness, a world in which the gendered division of labor between public and private spheres remained intact.

According to Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, around the same time Fender was singing of faithless women, patriarchal Chicano cultural nationalists deployed versions of the Malintzin story in an attempt to police Chicanas and consign them to the margins of political movements. In the Malintzin myth, Chicanos figured betrayal as feminine, but they imagined La Raza (the Race) as male. In extreme cases, this resulted in the valorization of machismo as the defining feature of Chicano culture in general and of brown power movements in particular. The masculinization of brown culture also took less drastic forms, as in creative and critical works that focused almost exclusively on heroic Chicano resistance to white supremacy. Writing about Rendon’s 1972 Chicano Manifesto, Chabram-Dernersesian concludes:

Within this logic, if Chicanas wished to receive the authorizing signature of predominant movement discourses and figure within the record of Mexican practices of resistance in the U.S., then they had to embody themselves as males, adopt traditional family relations, and dwell only on their racial and/or ethnic oppression.

In this way, according to Chabram-Dernersesian, patriarchal cultural nationalists attempted to render Chicanas invisible, except as traitors.

The masculinization of La Raza is not, however, a gesture unique to
Chicanos. On the contrary, in dominant Anglo representations, brown people have largely been imagined as male. Although the “Latin bombshell” and the “spitfire” stand out as important exceptions, the most popular images of brownness in mainstream culture—the lazy peon, the bandit (or gangster), the Latin lover—are all men. The Anglo construction of a hypermasculine brownness reflects a fascination with the macho as a uniquely Chicano character: in the Anglo imagination, brownness often stands for the extremes of masculinity as such. Thus in Anglo English, macho has been assimilated as a synonym for male. By assuming in this way an essential link between brownness and masculinity, Anglos are able to disavow patriarchal structures at the same time that they participate in them. As long as Anglos are able to point to machismo, they can either ignore the excesses of white masculinity or reimagine them as instances of courage or fortitude. Before too quickly pathologizing brown men as the sole inventors of machismo, however, we should recall that the construction of the hypermasculine Chicano was a joint venture. As Paredes reminds us, the macho is the product of a long history of cross-cultural exchange, and not an essential Chicano characteristic, as some Anglos and Chicanos would have us believe.

By stressing the hybridity of macho, I do not mean to shift the blame for patriarchy from brown to white men. While Chicanos cannot claim to have invented machismo alone, in numerous contexts they have affirmed and extended it—often at the expense of Chicanas. Fender’s songs, for example, often wallow in the pathos of a Chicano “betrayed” by faithless brown women. But I would argue that Fender’s performance of the cowboy ultimately deconstructs, as it were, masculinist models of chicanismo. For Paredes, the fact that the cowboy copies the vaquero means that the masculine ideals that the cowboy embodies cannot be claimed as the unique, legitimating property of Anglo hegemony. Conversely, acknowledging machismo’s intercultural construction contradicts the efforts of patriarchal Chicano cultural nationalists to ground their authority in the claim that certain masculine virtues are the unique, defining features of brown culture. Similarly, with his reinterpretation of the cowboy, Fender foregrounds the intercultural process of producing masculine types. Flaunting the artificiality of this back-and-forth movement, Fender in effect de-essentializes both white and brown constructions of masculinity.

Fender’s revisionary performance of the cowboy is perhaps clearest on the cover of the album, The Best of Freddy Fender. Here the singer appears dressed in blue denim western wear and a Stetson as he balances on top of a brightly colored terra-cotta pot. A huge, obviously fake cactus grows out of the pot and emerges from between Fender’s legs, rising neck high. He smiles (lasciviously? ironically?) at the camera over his shoulder. The background is a technicolor, View-Master–like desert landscape, with
canyons, mesas, and a lightly clouded blue sky. The photo looks like a Wild West cartoon, perhaps the *Road Runner*. Fender here parodies both the Anglo cowboy and the Chicano *macho*. By deploying theatrical props, costume, and backdrop, Fender denaturalizes the romantic, pastoral Anglo cowboy. Similarly, he mocks the Chicano’s reputation for *machismo* by straddling the absurd phallus—a cactus that looks literally inflated. By grafting together stereotypes of both white and brown masculinity, the album cover underlines the highly “cultivated” (in the etymological sense of the word) nature of southwestern masculine imagery. In other words, Fender stresses the fact that masculinity—whether white or brown—is an intercultural construction and not a racial essence. Rather than taking manhood seriously, Fender’s smile seems to be a wink and a nudge, his style an amalgam of cowboy kitsch and Chicano camp.

On this album cover, Fender thus stages an aesthetics of excess—campy, kitschy, over-the-top. Such terms also describe his distinctive vocal style. For example, Fender’s rendition of the song “Roses Are Red” is very different from the more famous pop rendition by Bobby Vinton. Like other Anglo pop stars from the 1950s and 1960s, notably Pat Boone, Vinton sings in a clear, even tone while his phrasing is controlled and “clean.” In contrast, Fender’s vocal signature is tremolo: his voice constantly vibrates and quavers, suggesting profound emotion. Whereas Vinton’s voice is controlled, Fender threatens to lose control of his voice and dissolve into tears.

Just as Fender’s voice is wet with affect, so are his lyrics. The paradigmatic Fender song involves tears, a vast sea of tears. His songs have titles like “A Man Can Cry” and “Before the Next Teardrop Falls.” The lover of “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights” asks his lost love, “Don’t you remember the day / When you ran away / And left me? / I was so lonely / Crying for you only / My Lo-o-ove.” To another lost love Fender sings, “Don’t leave me, I cried / Don’t take that airplane ride” (“Silver Wings”). To yet another he exclaims, “Can’t you see how much I cry?” (“I Want to Love You”). In “Matilde” Fender tells the woman of the title, “I cry and cry for you / No matter what you do.” Fender advises another ex-lover, “When you cry in your sleep tonight / Think about me. / When you weep for the one you love / Think about me. / Think of all the heartaches and pain you brought me to / But most of all think of me and you” (“Think about Me”). In “The Rains Came,” the meteorological phenomena suggest a distraught lover who cries all night: “Rain, rain, rain / My pillow’s soaking wet / I can’t find her in the morning / She’s not home yet.” Elsewhere the heavens seem to sympathize with the lover’s pain: “The stars up in the sky / They knew the reason why / I cried thinking of you” (“I’ll Be Coming Home Soon”). Similarly, in “Vaya con Dios” the night sky announces “the time for weeping.” As he concludes in one
song, “Many a tear has to fall / But it’s all in the game” (“It’s All in the Game”).

The three characteristics of Fender’s performances outlined above—his often parodic reinterpretation of country music and the Anglo cowboy; his tremulous, emotional vocal style; and his excessively emotional lyrics—together define a working-class Chicano aesthetic that transgresses the norms of a certain whiteness. According to Richard Dyer, whites have historically been associated with calm, control, rationality, and order. This is because white dominance depends upon the “establishment and maintenance” of borders between whites and their Others. Although the process of boundary-fixing is, in Dyer’s words, “functional for dominant groups . . . the capacity to set boundaries becomes a characteristic attribute of such groups, endlessly reproduced in ritual, costume, language, and, in cinema, mise-en-scène. Thus, whites and men (especially) become characterized by ‘boundariness.’”

All three elements of Fender’s aesthetic violate various Anglo borders. His reappropriation of the country-and-western genre disregards the clear distinction between brown and white, vaquero and cowboy. His bilingual recording of “Before the Next Teardrop Falls,” for example, has all but eclipsed the memory of previous versions by Anglo country stars. In this way, Fender invades a traditionally all-Anglo territory and thereby momentarily displaces the white cowboy singer. Or, put another way, Fender deauthorizes the white cowboy’s whiteness by confronting him with his double, the Chicano cowboy. If Fender at first seems parasitic on the Anglo cowboy, his work ultimately reveals the cowboy’s historical dependence on the vaquero. Moreover, as I have already noted, Fender’s singing style is neither calm nor controlled, qualities commonly linked to whiteness. His phrasing often threatens to dissolve the bounded integrity of individual words, tremulously expanding them with extra syllables, until his voice trails off into the void: “be-e-fore the-e ne-ext tear-drop fa-alls.” Instead of suggesting a bounded individual, Fender’s songs seem to emerge from a body on the verge of dissolution. The same can be said concerning lyrical content, as in songs in which Fender ventriloquizes men who melt into tears. Whereas in Dyer’s account the white body is fantastically self-contained, Fender’s brown body is fluid—he leaks.

Still, Dyer whitewashes with too broad a brush, eliding the important class differences between particular forms of white racialization. Some whites are whiter than others. For Dyer, whiteness has two seemingly contradictory characteristics: it is simultaneously bounded and unlimited, particular and universal. Or, as Dyer puts it, whiteness has the “representational power” “to be everything and nothing,” assuming “dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular” (141–42). Mobility—the smooth gliding between these apparently antithetical aspects of white-
Even given the implicit and explicit racism of some country performers and fans, an opposition to uptight, upper-class restraint can sometimes serve as the basis for the shared tastes of working-class whites and Chicanos. These lower-case whites—too enmeshed in class bodies to assume the representational power to be everything and nothing—may live this exclusion in a number of ways. For some, the class distance between themselves and Whiteness as a universal signified makes the latter all the more beguiling and seductive. Here, however, I am more interested in those who, barred from the “everything and nothing” poles of Whiteness, play out their racial identity along the borders, endlessly (re)producing and transgressing white integrity.

Only by differentiating the various instantiations of whiteness can we account for the cross-cultural appeal of a figure like Freddy Fender. The gallons of tears routinely shed in country music often make it embarrassing and distasteful to high-brow Anglos. Even given the implicit and explicit racism of some country performers and fans, an opposition to uptight, upper-class restraint can sometimes serve as the basis for the shared tastes of working-class whites and Chicanos. The crossover popularity of Freddy Fender would seem to be a case in point.

**Pachuco Realities**

“Our pachuco realities will only make sense if you grasp their stylization.”

—Luis Valdez, *Zoot Suit*

On the basis of the preceding analysis, I would like to hazard the following tentative conclusions concerning popular brown style. No doubt, Fender is a unique performer. Nonetheless, I take him to be representative of certain aspects of working-class Chicano aesthetics. I should also emphasize that my analysis is by no means exhaustive or empirically rigorous. Differences within the category Chicano—distinctions of gender, sexuality, and geography—make generalization difficult. Readers will certainly be able to think of numerous exceptions and additions to my list. Further, since brown stylists are dynamic hybridizers, my descriptive categories are not timeless but mired in the particular. Although my conclusions are thus necessarily speculative, they capture what I take to be the broad outlines of contemporary lowbrow(n) taste.

Black velvet bull fighters, tattooed tear drops, bombshell hairdos, lowriders, zoot suits, Christ crucified in 3-D, plastic roses, ceramic black panthers, calendars with Aztec warriors and maidens. When dealing with
Chicano popular culture, it is often easier to come up with examples than descriptive principles. We could label all of these examples camp or kitsch if these terms did not imply distance and condescension. In some accounts, camp and kitsch judgments implicitly distinguish between the naive and the more self-conscious consumers. As we shall see, while working-class Chicano style may not presuppose what Barbara Ching calls “the built-in sneer of the sophisticate,” it is by no means naive. In contrast to the ironic spectator, who may think a black velvet painting is so bad it’s good, a Chicano might find the painting simply beautiful. At the same time, however, the Chicano also recognizes that the taste for such paintings marks him as distinct. The black velvet aficionado may even self-consciously affirm brown aesthetics in opposition to Anglo taste. With these stipulations in mind, I propose that the following three interlocking terms describe a good deal of contemporary popular brown style: the makeshift, the flamboyant, and the nostalgic.

The Makeshift

As critics have often noted, many Chicanos are bricoleurs, making due with the materials at hand for the fashioning of cultural artifacts. For example, Paredes has analyzed the way in which various tejano phrases celebrate the Chicano bricoleur: a molcajete (mortar) becomes a “Mexican blender,” a tortilla a “Mexican fork.” Paredes concludes that “a la mexicana, always in Spanish, means doing something with wit and ingenuity rather than with much equipment and expense.” Similarly, Chon Noriega has argued that the necessity of “making do” characterizes Chicano filmmaking. In brown hands, however, “making do” becomes an aesthetic virtue. The ingenuity of such bricoleurs serves as a source of pride, distinguishing Chicanos from less inventive Anglos. “Brown style” thus names the process of constructing and valorizing racial identities in the context of economic and political oppression.

One important form “making do” takes on is collage. The above-cited examples of working-class Chicano style substantiate this claim, for many of them are not Chicano creations per se, but have been marked as such by acts of brown appropriation. The 3-D postcard may say “made in Korea” on the back, but it will carry different meanings when inserted into a home altar. As Kay F. Turner demonstrates, Chicana home altars employ collage, combining statues of the holy family and the saints, exvotos (medals representing body parts, men, women, children, cars, houses, cows, etc.), photographs of relatives and políticos (often one of the Kennedys), and miscellaneous articles such as ribbon and buttons. Turner concludes that the arrangement of the altar draws individual objects into

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signifying networks that establish various relationships, say between a
sore arm and the *exvoto* representing it, or between the holy family and
the earthly family. Lowrider cars are also collages, combining classic
American car frames from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, modern mechani-
cal devices (to lower the car or make it hop), elaborate ornamentation,
and paintings of Pancho Villa or the Virgen de Guadalupe. As I have
already indicated, Freddy Fender is a consummate *bricoleur* who combines
different languages and divergent musical styles, including rock and roll,
country, and *conjunto*. The resulting collage constitutes a new, hybrid
style—Tex-Mex. Given the present context, Chabram-Dernersesian’s
description of brown *bricoleurs* is apt. Writing of Chicana cultural workers
she concludes that “they are linked to a barrage of mixed popular cultural
practices, including Guadalupe, holy-rollers, lowriding, styling, and serape
sandals; Mariachis, Salsa, Freddy Fender, Vicki Carr; spray painting, *True
Confessions*, and revolutionary literature.”

Taking my lead from Dick Hebdige, I would posit a homology between
the historical conditions of many Chicanos and their popular styles.
Because Chicanos are themselves collages—an amalgam of Indian, Span-
ish, Mexican, and Anglo elements—their cultural products are also mix-
tures of fragments from diverse traditions. Collage is thus the stylistic
corollary of *mestizaje*, the “impure” status of racial and national mixture.
Essentially without a clear-cut racial or national essence, working-class
brown people become mixmasters.

*Flamboyance*

Chicano aesthetic objects are elaborate, extravagant, excessive. Once
again, the lowrider is a good example. To the lowrider, stock cars are
boring and pedestrian. Any fool can buy a car, but it takes a Chicano to
customize one. A real *firme* ride is a triumph of form over function—the
engine may not need gold parts and velvet casings, but it sure looks cool
with them. Every aspect of the car, no matter how small, can be made
bigger or more detailed. Moreover, the customizing process is never com-
plete, for cars can always be elaborated, complicated. Although not a
lowrider, Fender shares this aspect of lowrider style. Just as the lowrider
is constantly adding on to his car, Fender continually elaborates musical
phrases, extending them with extra syllables, embroidering them with
tremulous emotion. At the level of lyrical content, Fender’s endless pro-
duction of tears can also be subsumed under this category.

To those who do not appreciate it, working-class brown style can be
too ornate, too gaudy, too florid, too loud, too busy, too much—an
embarrassment of riches. Or, in Fender’s case, an embarrassment of tears
transgressing idealized bodily boundaries. Conversely, working-class Chicanos often self-consciously sublimate their flamboyant tastes to an uptight, jaitón (high-toned) Anglo aesthetic which valorizes simplicity, subtlety, and elegance. The opposite of jaitón is rasquache, or “low class.” Though close, this translation of rasquache does not adequately capture the word’s confrontational meanings. According to Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, rasquachismo describes an in-your-face aesthetic, “the attitude, tastes or life-style of the underdog, where status is elevated with garish decoration.” Rasquache “articulate(s) a stance that repudiates the Anglo experience”—and, I might add, the experiences of upwardly mobile Chicanos. In southern Texas, for example, musical tastes have historically divided working-class and middle-class Chicanos. While the former listen to conjunto, the latter generally prefer orquesta, a Chicano big band music with links to American and Latin American styles. Orquesta aficionados often scorn the “crudeness” of conjunto, while conjunto fans think that orquesta is too “jaitón.” For his part, Freddy Fender explains that he was never drawn to orquesta—its performers “thought they were too hot shit for me.” Just as “making do” becomes a means of affirming brown ingenuity, the rasquache character of conjunto allows working-class Chicanos to construct an alternative cultural identity as a counter to highbrow style.

**Nostalgia**

Brown style often looks backward, into the Chicano past. Rosaura Sánchez notes, for example, that a good deal of Chicano literature exhibits “nostalgia for a lost period, for a former sense of community.” The same can be said for brown visual arts and music. There are at least four modes of historical representation in Chicano cultures. First is the (largely masculine) heroic past, including images (on velvet, on walls, on cars) of Mexican revolutionary figures such as Villa and Zapata. These images belong to a tradition that, like many corridos, celebrates armed resistance. In addition, the phrase heroic nostalgia could also describe images from the more recent past, including representations of César Chávez and Rodolfo “Corky” González. Although this form of nostalgia has often focused on masculine imagery, we can detect elements of heroic nostalgia in Chicana reworkings of the Virgen de Guadalupe and other female figures.

The second mode of imagining the past is rural or pastoral, represented primarily in the música ranchera tradition. Peña argues that this music conveys lo ranchero, a set of concepts that are part of a larger “ideology of romantic nationalism” originating (in its contemporary shape at least) during the 1910 Mexican Revolution and extending into popular...
films starting in the 1930s. As one aspect of lo ranchero, música ranchera idealizes rural life in general and the hacienda in particular, evoking “the ideal combination of qualities that Mexicans ascribe to themselves, qualities that are embodied in the twin symbols of the charro (cowboy) and the campesino (farm worker).” Peña concludes that música ranchera produces “momentary recreations of a simpler and romanticized folk heritage, tempered nonetheless by the realization that it is an ineffable existence, lost forever like the elusive lover of most ranchera song lyrics.”

Some of Freddy Fender’s songs would seem to fit this last description. His version of “El Rancho Grande,” for example, indicates a rural setting. Similarly, “Vaya con Dios” begins with a pastoral scene—“Now the hacienda’s dark, the town is sleeping”—and includes the parallel motif of lost love. Most of Fender’s lyrics, however, concern lost love without the rural setting. Such narratives comprise the third mode of historical representation—the lover’s past. As I have indicated, the lover’s past—amply represented in Fender’s music—is often a medium for reflecting upon various forms of historical dispossession.

The final mode of representation is the meso-American past. Aztec imagery is quite common in Chicano visual arts, from calendars to murals to cars. Representations of Aztec warriors, maidens, and pyramids are ubiquitous in working-class brown communities. Chicanos also like images of plains Indians. Murals and paintings, for example, often interpret the famous photo of Geronimo holding a rifle, or Frederick Remington’s painting of an Indian on horseback, The End of the Trail. This fondness for Indian imagery is not surprising—after all, Chicanos are themselves the product of the violent confrontation between Europeans and meso-Americans. The Chicano use of meso-American iconography constitutes a stylized theorization of brown mestizaje. With representations of a native past, Chicanos (re)articulate the historical links between themselves and indigenous peoples.

The preceding list of nostalgic modes is necessarily partial. Furthermore, my categories are not mutually exclusive. Meso-American imagery can also be pastoral or, as in the case of the gun-toting Geronimo, heroic. Nonetheless, the types of nostalgia I have enumerated characterize a good deal of Chicano popular culture.

For some intellectuals, nostalgia is a bad word, implying a reactionary retreat from present problems into an idealized mythic past. While some of my examples may be open to such a charge, others have a very different orientation to the past. My general claim is that it is impossible to determine, a priori, the functions or effects of working-class brown nostalgia. Instead, we must consider the particular context of any given instance of nostalgia. For example, in música ranchera, the pastoral past is not something one can “escape” into. On the contrary, such music figures the past
as “an ineffable existence, lost forever.” Expressions of nostalgia are not always or only retreats into mythic time, but can instead serve to remobilize the past as a motivating force for action in the present.

The “History and Heroes” mural in Chicano Park, San Diego, exemplifies this kind of motivating nostalgia. By the late 1960s, the Logan barrio, future home of the park, had been crisscrossed by a freeway and bridge to Coronado Island. In 1970, a group of Chicano artists, called “Toltecas in Aztlan,” began planning a park and murals under the bridge. They were eventually joined by a second group, “Congreso de Artistas Chicanos en Aztlan.” The murals were to represent three eras in Mexican history—pre-Columbian, colonial, and contemporary—as well as recent events in Chicano history. Juxtaposed in the planned murals were images of historical figures such as Joaquin Murieta (nineteenth-century California bandit and folk hero), Villa, and Zapata, as well as contemporary heroes such as César Chávez and Rubén Salazar. Soon after work on the park had started, however, the California Highway Patrol bulldozed the area, hoping to build a police parking lot. Residents of the community—artists, students, families—reacted by occupying the Ford Building in San Diego’s Balboa Park and demanding both a Chicano cultural center in Balboa Park and the right to complete Chicano Park. As a result, Chicano Park assumed its present form while the Centro Cultural de la Raza now stands in Balboa Park. In this way, the murals used “nostalgic” images of the heroic Chicano past to inspire a small act of urban reconquest. The reactivation of the past in the present is neatly symbolized by a male figure on horseback in the Logan murals: the figure was initially painted as Pancho Villa but was later changed to a member of the Brown Berets, the militant group of Chicano activists.

This is not to say that nostalgia necessarily results in forms of organized political action. And yet the San Diego mural movement exhibits an understanding of history that is shared by other, less interventionary examples of Chicano culture. Within the model of history implied by brown nostalgia, the past remains subject to constant re-elaboration. Just as the lowrider vehicle is never complete but always open to new customizations, the Chicano past can always be refigured and renewed. Once again Fender’s music is a case in point. As I have indicated, Fender is a master of reinterpretation, routinely reperforming hit songs from the past. Similarly, Fender reproduces his “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights” and “Before the Next Teardrop Falls” on almost every album. Perhaps most striking in this regard is his recent release, The Freddy Fender Collection, which includes not only new versions of his hits, but also inspired covers of old rock and rhythm-and-blues tunes. Appropriately enough, this album was released on the Reprise label. The conclusion I draw from all of these reprisals is that for Fender, as for other brown stylists, personal

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and cultural histories remain open to endless remobilizations. More recently, Chicano rappers have remobilized a newly modified set of working-class brown memories. Los Angeles hip-hop performers such as Kid Frost, ALT, JV, Lighter Shade of Brown, Funky Aztecs, and Aztlan Underground have all produced—in different ways and to varying degrees—a complex body of rasquache work. As is already clear from the preceding list, many of these musicians reanimate Azteca and other indígena imagery. The logo for the Funky Aztec CD “Chicano Blues,” for example, depicts the group’s name encircling a stylized Aztec warrior. Similarly, on “Hispanic Causing a Panic” and “Live from the East Side,” Kid Frost refers to himself as both an “Aztec Warrior” and an “Aztec Evangelist.” The rapper known as “Machete” combines hip-hop beats with pre-Columbian flutes in his nonviolent, nonsexist songs of brown pride and resistance. Chicano rappers also graft the Mexican revolutionary heroes so common in Chicano murals onto the “gangsta” persona, as when Frost identifies himself with Pancho Villa, or Lighter Shade of Brown raps a tribute to Zapata. While (recorded) brown hip-hop is largely male, rapper JV is an important exception. With her album “Nayba’Hood Queen” she reappropriates the power of the Virgen de Guadalupe—commonly called the “Reina de México y Emperatriz de América”—so as to construct a working-class Chicana “gangsta” persona. This feminist chola queen engages in acts of urban reconquest, “stompin’ on the concrete like I own the street.” All of these artists liberally spike their songs with Spanglish references to some of the staples of rasquachismo, including zoot suits and lowriders. JV describes a homegirl weekend outing in this way:

   Rolling with the fly ride brown pride mobile autos,
   we jump in the back with the 40 bottles . . .
   Just cruisin’ the boule’ in a six-four rag
   dropped so low, it makes the ass drag.
   (“Stompin on the Concrete Like I Own the Street”)

Most of these rappers are regular performers on the national lowrider show circuit.

If the nostalgic tradition represented by Freddy Fender has an heir apparent, however, it is surely El Vez, “the Mexican Elvis.” El Vez—or simply “El Rey”—is Robert López, a Chicano from San Diego. Recalling Fender’s early Presley covers, El Vez does Elvis en español, as in the song “Está Bien Mamacita.” At other times, he sings brown-power lyrics to the tune of Elvis songs. For example, El Vez transforms “Little Sister” into “Chicanisma You Can,” an anthem of Chicana empowerment. Similarly, he turns “Suspicious Minds” into a musical critique of repressive border policies called “Immigration Time.” El Vez has also recorded Elvis-inspired songs, such as the rockabilly tunes “Go Zapata Go” and “César
Chávez.” Like Fender, El Rey borrows from a variety of musical genres, including rock and roll, rockabilly, *conjunto*, *mariachi*, and country. In this regard the opening minutes of El Vez’s CD “Graciasland” epitomize brown hybridization. The first cut is a version of the traditional mariachi tune “La Negra,” supplemented with rock and roll power cords. The next song is “Huaraches Azules,” a fairly faithful Spanish rendering of “Blue Suede Shoes.” Finally, the song “Aztlan” loosely follows the melody of Paul Simon’s “Graceland” driven by a Johnny Cash–like locomotive rhythm. It expresses a longing for the mythic Chicano homeland in this way:

The river *Río Grande* is carving like a national scar  
I’m following the river making wetbacks  
Where my parents crossed to be now where they are.
I’m going to *Aztlan*, where I wanna be, I’m going to Aztlan.  
My traveling companions, *La Virgen*, Miss Liberty,  
A map and my MEChA books.
Well I’ve reason to believe, we all have been deceived  
There still is Aztlan.  
Miss Liberty tells me Aztlan’s gone, as if I didn’t know that  
As if I didn’t know my own backyard, as if I didn’t know  
To get in you need a card.

While an earlier generation, represented in this essay by Freddy Fender, sometimes seems nostalgic for a time before the consolidation of Anglo hegemony in the Southwest, the preceding references to brown pride, revolutionary heroes, *la Virgen*, Aztecs, and MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicoano de Aztlan/Chicano Student Movement of Aztlan) indicate that contemporary brown stylists long for the militancy of the brown-power movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

While, as Angela Davis has argued, contemporary longings for the iconography of 1960s militancy can become a fashionable “nostalgic surrogate for historical memory,” they can also help remobilize the past for political interventions in the present.25 For instance, in 1993—two weeks after the death of César Chávez—Chicano students at UCLA imitated Chávez’s tactics and staged a twelve-day hunger strike, demanding the establishment of a Chicano-studies department to be named after the former United Farm Workers (UFW) leader. The UCLA protests helped inspire similar efforts throughout California, Colorado, Texas, and Virginia. Even more recently, more than one thousand Chicano high school students in San Francisco borrowed the tactics of 1960s east Los Angeles brown-power movements and launched a massive school walkout to protest against Proposition 187 and to support a more Chicano-centric curriculum. Meanwhile, the UFW has added nine thousand members in...
the wake of Chávez’s death. Finally, MEChA continues to grow, as its young new recruits take on Aztec names like Juatemo and Tonacin. These activists routinely invoke Aztlan, indigena, Zapata, and la Virgen.

But the more brown nostalgia stays the same, the more it changes. Many of today’s politicized brown stylists are hooked up. Or, to borrow a phrase from Guillermo Gómez-Peña, some Chicanos have become high-tech Aztecs. As Mandalit Del Barco notes, “The postmodern Chicanos . . . conduct their political activities through hunger strikes and rallies, issuing manifestos through faxes and computer E-mail.” Del Barco fails to mention, however, that for most young, working-class Chicanos, computers remain out of reach. Still, the emergence of a small Chicano cyberspace suggests comparison with deployments of technology within lowrider cultures. At a recent show in Chicago, I saw cars equipped with multiple cellular phones, TVs, VCRs, and video games. It is only a matter of time before the Internet makes its way into lowrider interiors.

Many contemporary brown protesters are also deeply invested in a new politics of alliance. According to Del Barco, “today’s Chicano activists say they’ve learned from the mistakes of their predecessors and have embraced the ideas and strategies of feminists, gays and lesbians, (and) African-American activists.” The seventeen-year-old L.A. activist Alfredo “Zapata” Macero indicates the potential alliance-building power of the term indigena when he says that California governor Pete Wilson “tells us that we have to have a green card to go to school and have to have a green card to get medical aid. We’re gonna tell him, we don’t need no green card, this is our land to begin with. We’re indigenous people and we are standing in solidarity with each other.” Sentiments like Macero’s have translated into Chicano protests in support of the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas, Mexico. Whereas some Movimiento members in the 1960s imagined la Raza on the model of the exclusive, patriarchal family, brown activists in the 1990s appreciate the importance of more flexible, contingent affiliations. Rapper/activist Yoatl of Aztlan Underground, for example, claims that

what we’re struggling for right now is getting the national Chicano movements together within Aztlan and letting them organize, like Chicano Moratorium, Chicano Human Rights Council, and eventually form a National Congreso, which would be analogous to the PLO. Then we would get together and talk about would we be separatist or would we just talk about self-government in a strategic sense under these conditions. So it’s up in the air in that sense—we call ourselves a nation under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, but we don’t believe in the whole national cultural mode of thinking.

Here we have what I would call a rasquache rendering of Gayatri Spivak’s “strategic essentialism.” Yoatl doesn’t “believe in the whole national cultural mode of thinking.”
cultural mode of thinking” that locates the nation in the blood reality of “la raza.” Instead, his Chicano nation resides in a set of sites (Chicano Moratorium, Chicano Human Rights Council, etc.) that, by virtue of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, have been designated “Aztlan” by brown activists. Chicanismo, in this account, is the contingent effect of negotiated representations and not a primordial, pregiven category. The precise content of the nation is thus left open or “up in the air.” Like other brown stylists, then, the new Chicano activist is an expert at tactical mixmastering.

Style Is Not a Luxury

These remobilizations of brown memory are in stark contrast to contemporary efforts to immobilize movements across the U.S.-Mexican border. The politics of immigration reform imply a profound contradiction: multinational capital depends on the traversing of borders at the same time that reactionary ideologues insist on racial cohesion in the name of national economic growth and global competitiveness. Efforts to seal the border suture this contradiction by scapegoating immigrants. Such scapegoating presumes the very white-supremacist cultural tradition that Fender’s reoccupation of the cowboy calls into question. In a recent opinion piece in the New York Times, an advocate of California’s Proposition 187 argued that illegal aliens threatened cherished American institutions, including the Protestant work ethic, baseball, and of course, country-and-western music. Indeed, it would seem that country music is on the soundtrack to the new nativism. While this fact might lead some to imagine that contemporary alien bashers are generally blue-collar yahoos, the truth is that no one class of whites has a monopoly on racism. After all, California’s Proposition 187, which denies government services to illegal aliens, is popular among all classes of whites. Moreover, if the whiteness of today’s country-and-western music is particularly glaring, part of the blame rests with well-to-do urbanites who have found in the music a haven from scary hip-hop lyrics and beats. An exclusive focus on poor white racism can do the dirty work of white supremacy, allowing middle- and upper-class people to obscure their own, often more effectual nativism. Given this context, it is vital that we recover the sometimes shared histories of brown and white working peoples and begin to divide up and hopefully dilute the power of a unitary whiteness. We must listen even harder to Chicana and Chicano voices, for they demonstrate that, despite the claims of white supremacy, many Anglos have always already crossed over into the wild side of life.
Notes

Q-Vos go out to Norma Alarcón, Elizabeth Alexander, Lauren Berlant, Pat Chu, Lisa Martínez, Shelley Streeby, and Ken Warren, who all read and commented on this essay. I would also like to thank members of the Mass Culture Workshop, the Workshop for the Study of Race and the Reproduction of Racial Ideologies (University of Chicago), the History of Consciousness Department (University of California, Santa Cruz), the participants at the Working-Class Lives/Working-Class Studies Conference (Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio), and the Social Text editorial collective for their helpful suggestions. Thanks to Greg Greenway for his research help. I would finally like to thank Linda and Paul Marez for their rasquache inspiration.


2. For my purposes, the term Chicano refers to peoples of Mexican descent living in the United States. Although Chicanos are concentrated in states such as Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas, they can be found in many parts of the Midwest as well, notably Chicago. The term Chicano has a complicated history, first as a derogatory word for working-class Mexicans and later, in the 1960s, as a badge of honor adopted by political activists. Brown, on the other hand, is a less precise term, referring in practice not just to Chicanos but to all American Latinos (i.e., Puerto Ricans, Guatemalans, etc.). Despite this imprecision, I use brown interchangeably with Chicano for a number of reasons. First, brown captures one important aspect of Chicano identity in the United States. From the position of white supremacy, all Latinos look alike, equally “brown.” Living as a Chicana or Chicano therefore means constantly shuttling back and forth between a geographically and historically particular identity and the broader, more diffuse “brown” identity imposed by Anglo culture. Brown thus refers, on the one hand, to the white supremacist flattening out of differences between various Latinos and, on the other hand, to the basis for a political coalition across differences. Second, like Chicano, brown designates the mixed nature of Southwestern peoples. For example, unlike Mexican American or even Hispanic, neither of the terms I use refers to nationality. This is because Chicanos are in effect neither Mexican nor American, but something in between. Chicanos are essentially “mestizo,” a mixture of Spanish, Indian, African, Anglo, and other influences. My use of brown, like my use of white for that matter, indicates the constructedness of racial categories.


4. Ibid., 23.

5. Ibid., 23. See also Américo Paredes, “With His Pistol in His Hand”: A Border Ballad and Its Hero (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), for a survey of Chicano folk celebrations of brown confrontations with white authorities.
6. All of the above Fender quotes are found in Bruce Cook and Peter S. Greenberg, “Tex-Mex Troubadour,” Newsweek, 24 November 1975, 85.


11. Ibid., 83.


17. Dick Hebdige, “Style as Homology,” in his Subculture: The Meaning of Style (New York: Methuen, 1979). In the same volume, see also “Style as Bricolage.” Since Hebdige’s object of study is working-class subcultures in Britain, it is clear that bricolage is not unique to Chicanos. It may be the case that “making do” is the condition of all marginal or dominated peoples.


23. Peña, Texas-Mexican Conjunto, 10–11.

24. Ibid., 11.


26. The source for the phrase high-tech Aztecs is Guillermo Gómez-Peña, exhibit poster, “Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco: The Year of the

27. Quoted by Del Barco, “A Resurgence of the Chicano Movement of the 1960s.” Here Macero riffs off the Mexican bandito’s response to Humphrey Bogart’s request for identification in The Treasure of the Sierra Madre: “I don’t have to show you no stinking badges!”

28. See the Aztlan Underground interview in It’s Not about a Salary, 265–66.