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The *albur* and *refrán* as tropes for identity construction in Mexico

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The "albur" and the "refrán" are two linguistic modes of the Spanish language popularly yet marginally used throughout Mexico that serve to construct alternative identities, understandings and a sense of community. The "albur", a phrase of humouristic sexual or eschatological connotations in double meaning, involves a similar dialogic response. The "refrán", which is a citation of traditional oral wisdom, often in rhyme, defines the learned and experienced character of its utterer. Both forms are tropes on which popular culture is built and defined on individual, group, class and national levels, subverting the established norms and meanings of the (imposed) Spanish language and continuous crises. As the imagination is cultivated, polysemic understandings are created and identity is strengthened.

Key-words: *albur*, *refrán*, *Mexican, dialogic humour, mental agility, cultural creativity*.

1. Introduction

This paper considers as oral literature two figures of speech commonly and popularly used in the colloquial everyday language of Mexico: the *albur* and the *refrán*. The first, the *albur*[2], is particularly embedded in Mexican culture and involves a double meaning in each dialogic utterance, for which we establish its historical reasons and our classification of current *albur* types. The second figure, the *refrán*,[3] is a gentler form of inherited wisdom expressed with certain humour. Although they may seem antagonic at first glance, they constitute a binary complex in which identity is continuously defined and redefined and both are means for survival under harsh situations.

2. The general context

What is generally considered characteristic of Mexican culture is its creativity, manifest in popular expressions, which are material and immaterial, tangible and intangible. These are doted with flexibility, adaptation, improvisation, originality,

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[2] *Albur* also means a chance situation, a risk, a whim, a pun and a lie. *Albures* is the plural form.

[3] The plural form of *refrán* is *refranes,* which shall be used in this text.

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ingenuity, humour and often, a festive sense. This creativity is visible in the colours people paint their houses, as well as in the food and objects with which they decorate or surround their immediate environments, such as shops, workshops, eating places and small businesses(see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Characteristic houses, food and utilitarian objects

It is obviously visible in art, as much in the works of Mexico's grand masters – such as the famous muralists and other painters of the 20th century– as in the popular arts, where colors, strong vibrant and contrasting, are emblematic (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Diego Rivera Mural at the National Palace of Mexico

Creativity is also visible in any celebration, be it serious, such as the Days of the Dead[4] or someone's funeral. Colours can be jubilous as in the annual festivities of a

[4] Days surrounding all Saints' Day in which tribute is rendered to the ancestors and deceased.

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village, town or city neighborhood when religious, civic, or individual celebrations occur (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Altar and sweets for Days of the Dead and a village street during festivities

A sense for color, creativity, adaptation, flexibility, spontaneity and improvisation appear as outstanding collective traits occurring in daily life, and are regarded as key elements in the construction of the so-called 'Mexican character', as they are found in all corners of everyday life throughout the country. Additionally, these collective traits are embedded in the widespread use of language itself, where linguistic components of the Spanish spoken in the country, along with the more than sixty native languages of the diverse regions, have incorporated modalities (known as *modismos*), syntactic structures, as well as *mexicanismos* (Mexicanisms), which are terms and expressions taken from the indigenous languages, particularly from Nahuatl and Mayan.[5]

Other outstanding traits are the capacity to distort language, to approach and create new expressions, and to stretch the boundaries of normal usage to forge new expressions. Culture is far from static, and language as an integral part of culture, hence, is in continual evolution. Amidst the immense cultural diversity in Mexico, we have selected two linguistic figures of speech – the *albur* and the *refrán* - that we consider particularly outstanding and significant. These are closely related to what, despite Mexico's multi- and inter-culturality is popularly denominated as *a sense of Mexican identity* and which Mexican social critic, Carlos Monsiváis, calls "the

[5] All translations of texts cited from Spanish publications are by Yosi Anaya, denominated from here on as OT (own translation).

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redistributions of order within the chaos."[6] He affirms that Mexican national culture cannot be defined or listed within rigorous categories, but rather, he references 'preferential contents' that can be either complementary or antagonic.[7] These contents are expressions that combine some of the key components repeatedly found in the attitudes and reactions of Mexicans throughout.

3. "Albur"

An *albur* is a game of words with double meaning. This double meaning or sense is generally sexual or eschatological. The intention of an *albur* is to verbally trip **t**he other person jokingly and in fun. An *albur* is also a means to communicate an insult or an affront that is generally friendly towards another interlocutor. (Yes, a friendly insult) It is also a way of sharing a space jokingly, mischievously through the dialogue that it entails – that dialogue which is a game of clever humour – involves speaking in *albur*, composing a new *albur* to top the previous. *Alburear* (*albur*-making) necessarily is dialogic. It is defined as 'a fencing match' by Patrick Johansson in his research into the historical and contemporary use of language in Mexico[8] and as 'a game of chess' by the champion practitioner of the *albur* Lourdes Ruiz[9] of the infamous barrio of Mexico City, known as Tepito, where practice of *alburear* continuously penetrates every corner of life and begins in childhood (see Figure 4). The 'game' ends when the other interlocutor can no longer come up with a response quickly enough, that is, when a new utterance cannot be invented to counteract the previous.

[6] Monsiváis, Carlos. 1981. "Notas sobre el Estado, la cultura nacional y las culturas populares en México" in *Cuadernos Políticos.*No. 30. Mexico: Era. Oct-Dec. 33-52.

[7] *Ídem*, p. 33.

[8] See: Johansson, Patrick. 2002."Cuecuechcuicatl, 'canto travieso': un antecedente ritual prehispánico del albur mexicano." *Literatura Mexicana. Vol. 13, No. 2.*

[9] Lourdes Ruiz is known as the "Queen of the Albur," who grew up in the barrio of Tepito where the male population employs *albures* continuously in normal conversations. Having noticed its use in her family since childhood, she decided to also play the game and has become so agile with conjuring up *albures* that she can outdo almost any other utterer. Lourdes is now a national figure and even teaches *albur*-making classes in Tepito's community cultural centre.

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Figure 4. Lourdes Ruiz, Queen of the *Albur*, in front of her stall at the Tepito market

The *albur* as a form of expression is truly widely disseminated among the popular classes of Mexico, where it is practiced on a daily basis as a friendly duel of words bordering lightly on the obscene. *Albures* can pervade every aspect of a person's activities, wherever a double meaning can be implied. Although understood in higher social levels, its practice tends to sprout more in certain moments of conversation and coexistence involving the sharing of experiences, as at work, the office, the marketplace, street corners, shops and small businesses, even at parties, as exemplified in the film *Dos Tipos de Cuidado,*[10] where the two most iconic singer-actors of Mexico, Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete, scenified this 'duel' through the improvised verses of each song in trying to outwit the other. The onlookers were keen to see who could go to the furthest degree of picardy until the thread would break (see Figure 5).

In our research into the *albur*, we have come to notice different *albur* styles or modalities for which we have established a typology, which dissects and better explains them. Thus, the *albur* as a game of words employs mainly four verbal modalities: ASSOCIATION (metonymy), DECONSTRUCTION (of innocuous words), RHYME and INSINUATION. This last modalito further derives in three sub-modes: ANTICIPATION – predicting the 'obscene' word without actually saying it; ENTONATION of phrase utterance and timbre of voice; and DISGUISE – as a *refrán.*



Figure 5. Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete duel singing in *Dos Tipos de Cuidado,* 1953

[10] Rodríguez, Ismael (Director). 1953. *Dos Tipos de Cuidado*. Cinematográfica Tele-Voz. Mexico.

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The first modality of *albur* is the ASSOCIATION of apparently innocuous or harmless words and expressions with sexual or eschatological notions. That is, it involves metonymy (*Hypallage*) because it transfers the name of one object on to another object from which it is really distinct, but to which it is connected by some external relationship (in this case, connected by the Mexican collective imagination or the unique intention of the *alburero*) and thus becomes a synonym for the original name. This name transfer, in particular, catalizes the effects of the *albur*, endowing it with vitality, often originality and humour, although the 'friendly insult' might seem grotesque or obscene to outsiders. Its double meaning is said in jest and not as an insult. Although the topics can be quite 'hot,' never are crude words or obscenities enunciated. The *albur* conveys the message in a joking way, without recurring to crude words at all.

We thus have to name just a few examples, as in the following list: *chile* (chilli pepper) stands for penis; *papaya* (tropical fruit) stands for vagina; *teleras* (large bread buns) stand for the buttocks; *chicharrón* (crispy, toasted pigskin) stands for the female breasts and is derived from the Mexican term *chichi,* meaning female mamary glands – *dar chichi* is to breastfeed; *frijoles* (cooked beans) is understood as excrement; *leche* (milk) is understood as semen; *bajarsepor los chescos*(to go down for the soft drinks) is to give oral sex; *checar el aceite* (to check the oil) is to penetrate someone (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Chile, papaya, telera, chicharrón, frijoles, leche, bajarsepor los chescos, and checar el aceite.

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The idea is to use these codified words in their double meaning, expecting always a reply from the other person in order for the original utterance to have effect, such as:

Spanish	English
Abuelito, ¿Quieres tu lechita?	Grandpa, do you want your milk? (Meaning to give or drink up semen)
and the reply would be:	
Mejor sácame un rato al sol.	Better that you put me out in the sun. (Meaning masturbation)
Es tu perro y tú lo bañas.	It's your dog, and you bathe him. (Implying: you masturbate)

The second modality that is generally employed in the *albur* is the DECONSTRUCTIONof innocuous words to create words or expressions that are completely different, but that imply a sexual or eschatological message:

Spanish	English
Gallitoinglés	(The British emblematic rooster) transfers into *gallitoíngles,* that is from *inglés to ingles* or loins, and understood as penis amidst loins.
But then, this term in English is of course well known, since rooster is also cock, having an almost parallel meaning.	
El pelón con suelas de cuero, su morral y su monedero.	The bald one with leather soles, his carrying bag and his coin purse.
El pelón (the fallus) *consuelas* (consoles) *de cuero* (leather, flesh), *sumo* (I sink - penetrate) *-nedero*. (double penetration).	
- De Puebla, lo más famoso son sus camotes, *- No, essu mole.*	-Puebla is famous for its yams (phallus) - No, it it is its *mole* sauce
Es-sumo-le (penetrate) literally meaning, I add to it.	
Estupendo (Es tu pedo)	*Es tu pennnnnnn-do* – implying *pedo*
(It's your fart – synonymous with: it is your problem, your fart) But stretching the N, deforms it to highlight the embedded word, penis.	

A third form of *albur* is the RHYME, where verses rhyme in simple metrics that have a cadence. The interlocutor then should reply with another rhyme in his *albur*:

Spanish	English
Anoche fui a tu casa, *y me ladraron los perros,* *quise agarrar un piedra,* *y me embarré lo dedos.*	Last night I went to your house, and the dogs barked at me, I wanted to grab a stone, but I smeared my fingers.

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The *albur* sense has taken form in regional music styles. The mischievous rhymes from Yucatán are chanted loudly, are called *bomba.* Each stanza is called out in the pauses during traditional dancing while musicians play These involve both the man and woman replying to each other and the public cheering them on (see Figure 7). They are picaresque and expected to be spicy with sexual connotations. Often the woman's response out does the man's:

Spanish	English [OT]
Él: Quisiera ser zapatito *que calza tu lindo pie,* *para ver de vez en cuando* *lo que el zapatito ve.* *¡BOMBA!*	He: I would like to be the little shoe that fits you lovely foot, to see once in a while what your little shoe sees. *BOMBA!*
Él: Me metieron a la cárcel *dicen que por un delito* *por una x'lá papaya* *que comió mi pajarito.* *¡BOMBA!*	He: They sent me to jail they say because of crime because a of a lovely papaya that ate my little bird. *BOMBA!*
Ella: Un pajarito volando *se introdujo en un convento* *¡qué contentas las monjitas* *con el pajarito adentro!* *¡BOMBA!*	She: A little bird flying went into a convent how joyous were the dear nuns with the little bird inside. *BOMBA!*
Él: Yo tengo un perro muy grande *y tu uno pequeñito* *¿que tal si te doy el grande* *y tu me das el chiquito?* *¡BOMBA!*	He: I have a very large dog and you a very small one, how about if I give you the large one and you give me the little one. *BOMBA!*
Ella: Es verdad, tengo perrito *y es famoso en la ciudad* *pero es más famoso chulito* *el bulldog de tu mamá.* *¡BOMBA!*	She: It's true, I do have a little dog and he´s famous in the city but even more famous, dear boy, is the bulldog belonging to your mother. *BOMBA!*



Figure 7. Traditional *Bomba* dancing in Yucatán.

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Additionally, the picaresque sense in rhymes of sexual connotations is also embedded in other regional music genres of Mexico, particularly along the coasts of Veracruz on the Gulf side and the hotlands of Guerrero, Michoacán and Oaxaca along the Pacific.

A fourth modality of *albur* is INSINUATION.This form is subtler, for it suggests a supposed meaning. This modality has three variants:

ANTICIPATION: One variant of insinuation is that the normally forbidden cuz words can be predicted and the sayer then does not have to fill them in. He simply sets up the phrase so that the outcome can be anticipated without having to say it, or he may deviate from pronouncing them and fill in with something related in sound, or utter its beginning letters but of divergent meaning, which often makes it very funny. Television comedian and critic

Víctor Trujillo, as one of his characters *El Charro Amarillo*[11] (The Yellow Horseman) sings a *corridor* (see Figure 8) - well known traditional genre of Mexican song – as a social critique of the situation in the country during the Presidency of Felipe Calderón (2006-2012):

Spanish	English(OT)
Pásenle pa'lo barrido *que aquí está el Charro Amarillo* *que los tendrá entretenidos* *ah traviesos (atravieso)… picarillos.*	Come into the swept part that here the Yellow Horseman will entertain you ah, prankster (I cross into you)… rascals.
Para tratar lo del crimen *hubo ríspida reunión* *porque todos se sentían* *a cual más del más… (cabrón).*	To deal with the crime there was a rough meeting because everyone was feeling who was the most of the most... (scumbag).
Felipe y gobernadores *tienen caras amargadas* *pues resulta que el consejo* *fue de puras… (pendejadas).*	Felipe and governors have embittered faces because it turns out the council was about pure... (bullshit).
Por la crisis tan canija *la gente anda toda atolondrada* *el capital extranjero* *se está yendo a la… (chingada).*	Because of the damned crisis the people are bewildered foreign capital is going to... (fucking hell).
Rafael Caro Quintero *aquél que sembraba hierba* *después de un cuarto de siglo* *le dejaron ir la… (verga).*	Rafael Caro Quintero [cartel leader] he that sowed the weed after a quarter of a century they let him have the... (dick).
Benjamín González Roaro *de la Elba es un membrete* *lo puso en la lotería* *ah qué suerte de este… (ojete).*	Benjamín González Roaro [Nacional Lottery Head] is a letterhead of Elba [Teachers' Union Leader] she put him in the lottery ah what luck of this... (asshole).
El sol está pestañeando *la luna se siente inquieta* *porque sabe que tu hermana* *me va a hacer una… (chaqueta).*	The sun is blinking The moon feels restless because she knows her sister is going to give me a... (handj ob).

[11] Trujillo, Víctor. 2012. *El Charro Amarillo*. Televisa. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SgkzR6JmOY

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Figure 8. Víctor Trujillo as *El Charro Amarillo,* on television,Televisa channel, 2010.

ENTONATION: Another variant of INSINUATION proceeds even if the additional meaning added to words and themes is not common knowledge or normally understood. It is in the way the phrases are put together and the timbre of the voice used to chant the utterance that will set up that utterance as an *albur*, for which the other person would have to respond in a likely way. Even simple commentaries in everyday chores can be understood as an *albur*, a motive for mischievous humour – such as a secretary asking her boss:

Spanish	English
¿Le urge, jefe?	Is it urgent boss?
To which the boss may reply:	
No, lo podemos hacer mañana.	No, we can do it tomorrow.
Bueno, avíseme.	Well then, let mw know.
Here, normal office dialogue can be taken as an *albur*, implying sexual urgency, among those who are witty and alert in this type of parole.	

DISGUISE: A third variant of INSINUATION is bordering on the *refrán*, which corresponds to the second part of this paper, is the picaresque disguised as a wisdom saying, which is what a r*efrán* is, where the sayings come from popular inherited wisdom and are decorated with rhythmical and rhyming cadence. Some existing *refranes* are derived from the morals and proverbs of diverse tales, deeds or fables since Mesopotamian times, and which exist as well in practically all cultures. Nonetheless before further discussing the Mexican *refrán* itself, we are still concerned with the *albur*, in this particular variant, which is as a crossover into the *refrán* structure. Here the *albur* uses the *refrán* structure as a crutch. For example, in a conversation one may enunciate a *refrán* or saying of oral wisdom but transform it into an *albur*:

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Spanish	English
Quien en pan piensa, hambre tiene.	He who thinks of bread, is hungry.
Is a popular and well-known phrase, yet in the *albur* sense, its meaning indicates: one is anxious to have sex. And the reply might be:	
Y el que no, es porque ya comió.	And he who doesn't, it is because he already ate.
Meaning: he already had sex.	

Involving great mental dexterity, the *albur* is not necessarily an aggression, although it may appear so. In reality, the majority of *albureros* (those that say *albures)* practice these word games only among friends, colleagues or mates, given that it is known beforehand that *alburear* is simply about joking and not about doing – although it is implied. Those who say *albures* know well it is incorrect to say *albures* to someone who does not know how to *alburear* and does not know the codes of the *albur*. This would be considered abusive, and the laughter that sprouts would not be a shared experience – that is, there would be no mutual understanding. For as stressed, the act of uttering *albures* implies a dialogue. Always there should be a response, a response to the response, and further responses to the previous in the *albur* sense. The dialogue of this jokeful act is terminated when someone does not understand the connotations or does not respond. Thus, to utter an *albur* convokes a reply – meaning that there is another interlocutor who listens and replies, who is expected to answer back with another *albur* associated to the first one – built on the first one or deviating a bit from it but in the same style; the original sayer would then reply further with another *albur,* and so on. Always in a *dialogic* response, *albures* are built up creatively moving on from the initial starting point.

There are *albur* competitions held on local, regional and even national levels. The jurors measure the replication in real time, and so rolls forward a continual topping of the previous *albur*(while the audiences roar with laughter), until one competitor is left without the ability to answer back. It involves great dexterity and inventiveness in the use of language. The replies should be quick, not more than a few seconds in between. In which case, the last *alburero*, the last one to utter an *albur*, would be the winner, the cleverer one of the moment, thus closing the jokeful circle.

Although the birthplace of today's *albur* is claimed by the Tepito barrio of Mexico City, Pachuca in the state of Hidalgo, has strong claims because historically the *albur* came to be practiced by the local miners who were not allowed to say any direct, obscene words and phrases or to complain about their working conditions. Thus it is claimed that *albur*-making developed as a means to relieve the stress and control within the mines and to challenge the foreman (see Figure 9).

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Figure 9. Two contestants at the *Festival del Albur* in Pachuca

Víctor Henández in his anthology of the Mexican *albur* (*Antología del Albur Mexicano,* 2006) considers that the prevalence and propagation of the *albur* is due to the fact that in Mexican culture, good behaviour and good manners tend to be prioritized..[12] For which this would be a way to transcend those good manners in a playful way – that is, as a means to violate the rules. But we shall like to propose further factors to Hernández's theory for this cultural phenomenon as a reaction to mores; these lie further back in Mexico's particular history, rooted in the cultures of pre-Hispanic Mexico.

During the era when the Aztec Empire dominated many of the peoples of Mesoamerica, severe regimentation and measures for living were established for everyone. A strict regimentation of living was established for everyone. A strict education was considered highly important and more so for the aristocracy. In this, the Aztecs were in many ways similar to the Spartans, for they stressed austerity and seriousness in dress, possessions, behaviour, rules and social structures. All Aztec boys went through severe training, in war and religiosity. The girls underwent detailed training to master the arts of spinning and weaving and were mostly confined to the home (see Figure 10). An Aztec noble would counsel his daughter not to dress, arrange her hair, paint her face, nor chew gum in the way the Totonac women of the Gulf Coast went about, as this was seen as indecent and the custom of the gallant women.

> See that you dress with honesty. See that you do not adorn yourself with curious and very elaborate things. Look daughter, that your walking is honest.

[12] Henández, Víctor. 2006.*Antología del Albur Mexicano*. Toliro Multimedia and Incógnita/ Caja Negra. Charleston SC, USA: BookSurge Publishing.

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> Do no walk with haste nor too slowly, because walking slowly is a sign of pomp and walking quickly gives out an aftertaste of anxiety and restlessness. You will walk straight with your head slightly bowed.[13(OT)]

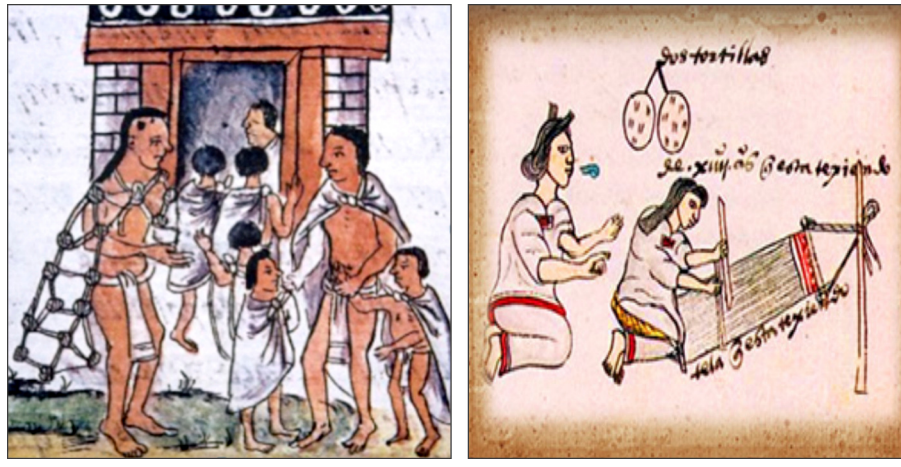


Figure 10. Aztec boys being educated at the *Teocalli;*
Aztec girls being trained in the art of weaving, 16th century.

Unbending laws were established throughout, not only pertaining to the tribute by the subjugated peoples, but rules which regulated almost all parts of society in an ordered but harsh way. Even the fibers used for clothing were controlled. That is, only the aristocracy had the privilege to use cotton, brought in as tribute from the hot lowland provinces; the common people could not use it; they had to wear sisal clothing. The use of colour was also controlled, as pigments and dyes were also brought in to the capital through tribute and trade. However, tribute was not used necessarily for the amassment of personal richness but rather to sustain and contribute to the heavy, and of this, non-austere, sumptuous and complex ceremonial life of the capital where the entourage of nobles, priests. Rulers were involved in multiple rituals.

We have the vestiges of the legacy of Aztec and Nahua songs. Among them is the erotic chant *cuecuechcuicatl* (*canto travieso,* in Spanish) meaning mischievous song, which is a literary construction with a poetic sense that is both erotic and picaresque. There existed diverse genders of pre-Hispanic songs where morality, myths, rites, tales, magical enchantments, and other generic expressions contained erotic elements, in which life and death were intimately linked, and song and dance

[13] Sahagún, Fray Bernardino de. 1988. *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España.(Introducción, paleografía, glosario y notas de Alfredo López Austin y Josefina García Quintana.).* Madrid: Alianza. pp. 370-371.

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were united in ritual feasts. That is, through figurative verbal construction, these chanted poems were fused in dances and acted out ritually for the purpose of propagating the growth of maize through ritual; and probably, according to Johansson, these songs constitute the first ritual manifestation of what is today the *albur* among profane circles.

> These erotic chants or songs were subtle mixture of gestural lubricity, verbal licentiousness and discursive ambiguity. Although their aim was to conjure up fertility of the land, to ward off drought, and to guard against bad times, they also were a means for draining erotic and tanatic pulsations, as well as for recreation, relaxation and play.[14] (OT)

Thus, these expressive synthesis– fusion of words, gesture, vocal effects, colors and aromas of a musical-dancistic moment were the optimal medium for expressing indigenous eroticism. Hernández coincides in considering the c*uecuechcuicatl* as the pre-Hispanic antecedent of the Mexican *albur*, while he defines it as the "song of tickling", also the "song that annoys or incites," in accord with Duran's 16th century denomination of c*uecuechcuicatl* as *canto/baile cosquilloso o de comezón*[15]– meaning "song/dance of tickles or itching" rather than *canto travieso,* preferred by Johansson. Shrouded in the nuances of the sensual metaphors of the Nahuatl language, the *cuecuechcuicatl* functioned as an escape valve for the pervading strict rules within pre-Columbian society (see Figure 11).



Figure 11. Nahuas in merriment, 16th century

[14] Johansson, Patrick. 2006. "Dilogía, metáforas y albures en cantos eróticos". *Revista de Literaturas Populares*. VI-1. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, pp. 63-95. SeeJohansson'sabstract of:theabstract of:"Cuecuechcuicatl, 'canto travieso': un antecedente ritual prehispánico del albur mexicano." 2002. *Literatura Mexicana.*Vol. 13, No. 2. http://www.revistas.unam.mx/index.php/rlm/article/view/28504

[15] Durán, Fray Diego. 1967. *Historia de lasIndias de Nueva España e Islas de Tierra Firme*, México: Porrúa. Vol. 1, p. 193.

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That is to say, here was a strain of poetry that was not only meant for ritual but also existed as an outlet to play out sexual mischief accompanied by dramatized dance representations. Surviving *cuecuechcuicatl* have to do with personal insights and sexual yearnings, as demonstrated in this section of this 16th century Nahuatl poem "*Xochicuicatl Cuecuechtl*i."[16]

Nahuatl	Spanish	English (OT)
Nehcoya o no cehpanehcoya nichahuichalotzinnoncuicaya mayaxiccaquican a nichuitequi anicchachalatzayaypan oho yanomatzin	*Lleguéya, otravezllegué, soy el Loroparlanchín. Canto, ¡oigan! loestoydesparramando,yaparloteosobre mi ramitael agua de mi florcrece, crece.*	I arrived already, again I arrived, I am the chattering parrot. I singlisten! I am spilling it, I babble over my twig the water of my flower grows, grows.

With the European Conquest, repression got even worse. Not only was the old order obliterated, destroyed and persecuted, but also the new one, imposed at first by the Spanish Conquistadors and then afterward by Spain's religious flanks, always brought fire and sword, plus plagues that repressed, punished and annihilated the population even further.



Figure 12. Portrait of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, page from Sahagun's documentation, and *Cantares Mexicanos* (first book of songs in Nahuatl), 16th century.

[16] Part of section 6 of "*XochicuicatlCuecuechtli*," mischievous chant cited in Johansson, 2006.p.33 and taken from *CantaresMexicanos*. Mexico: Manuscript in Nahuatl of the National Library of Mexico, 1994, fols. 67r-68r.

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The imposed Iberic culture and tongue from the 16th century onwards was not that of the European Renaissance, but rather a Mediaeval culture mediated by the fierce Spanish Inquisition. Hence the original *cuecuechcuicatl*songs in all their dramatized, illustrative, danced splendor were prohibited by the Church after the Conquest of Mexico because they were considered indecent and obscene. Yet the Spanish friars during the 16th Century set about recording the remains of Nahua culture as part of their strategy for evangelization; they sought first to know the other in order to convert him to Christianity (see Figure 12).

Nahuatl chants of pre-Hispanic inspiration were thus recorded, although not in their original, prohibited versions. It might seem that the friars would have noticed the spicy, picaresque character of some of these documented chants, yet they could not measure the intensity of the erotism contained. Thus, some *cuecuechcuicatl*were incorporated into these valuable documents, candidly interpolated in the expressive waters that fed the mill of Christian faith.[17] This ambiguous situation along with the relative ingenuity of the monks seems to have catered to the pranks of the indigenous informants or scribes, who found a jovial and ingenious means to manifest the latent erotism and, hence, exercise a subtle revenge.

The literary gender of the *cucuechcuicatl* lies in song/poetry and was of an erotic/picaresque character, often with a double meaning; it was used in humour and political satire.[18] Yet Hernández also further considers the European contribution towards the *albur*:

> In Europe the eschatological, sexual humour, and insults were perfectly known and practiced for centuries. But it is until the creation of the "New Spain" that Mexican culture combines the pre-Hispanic double meaning of sexual connotation and the gross language of the Spaniards with a key element needed to understand the contemporary Mexican *albur*, which is - popular social discontent.[19(OT)]

The repression that was brought with the Conquest involved, fifty years after, the annihilation of ninety percent of the population through massacres and plagues; strict laws pervaded that left the natives as slaves in their own lands; the privileges belonged to the Spanish ruling class; native women were taken for sex and to procreate half-caste children, bringing about a great wave of continuous *mestizaje* – an ongoing mixture of races and cultural traits (see Figure 13).

[17] For pre-Hispanic poetry, see: León Portilla, Miguel. 1992. *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World.* University of Oklahoma Press.
[18] Hernández, 2006, pp. 303-304.
[19] *Ídem*, pp. 305-306.

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Figure 13. *Pintura de Castas* depicting *mestizjej,* 17th century.

The *albur* as a practice continued to evolve until the late 19th century when the Mexican state, under the rule of Porfirio Diaz (dictator for thirty three years) decided to prohibit its practice so as not to promote self-confidence or solidarity among the population in manifesting their ideas and free expression, which could derive in dissidence.



Figure 14. *Albur* as political satire published in *El Hijo del Ahuizote*, 1901.

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This is an instance in which the *albur* is officially recognized as an effective means to flaunt the status quo. It was feared as reaction to suppression, as an escape and means to release tension, channeling it into humour, color, and jest – hence, freedom. Thus at the beginning of the 20th Century, the *albur* comes also to occupy a space in publications, mainly in Mexico City, where it was disseminated in various formats such as flyers, posters, song books and pamphlets as a means to make fun of the dictatorship (see Figure 14).

According to Monsiváis, culture is constructed in the official rejection of a people's creative impulses; hence culture sprouts from its reaction to rejection.

> Historically, the heroic multitudes have been constituted by individuals fiercely chauvinistic and authoritative in their private spheres; in the same manner, national culture is also formed by the creations of a people and the rejection of that popular creative impulse.[20(OT)]

Therefore we have in the *albur* also a way in which Mexicans appropriate their own culture as a form of dissidence, communication, solidarity in social interaction and popular knowledge. It thus contributes to a sense of identity.
Yet the words of Monsiváis ring sadly true:

> In Mexico's popular culture, underneath the spectacles and entertainment, intervene the struggles for employment and housing, the harsh resistance to multiple opressions. Essentially, popular culture is not the mechanic sum of th eoffers of an industry, but rather the manner in which a collectivity asumes and assimilates these situations, transforming the min to these arch for rights: the right to work, the right to humour, to sexuality, to a citizenlife.[21(OT)]

The song by Chava Flores, *"¿A qué le tirascuandosueñas, mexicano?"* backs up Monsiváis' observation, conjuring up the tragedy and humour in cynism.

Spanish	English
A qué le tiras cuando sueñas mexicano? *a hacerte rico en loterías con un millón* *mejor trabaja y levántate temprano* *con sueños de opio sólo pierdes el camión*	What do you aim at, Mexican, when you dream? To become rich with lotteries of one million better that you work and wake up early with opium dreams you will only miss your bus.
A qué le tiras cuando sueñas mexicano? *con sueños verdes no conviene ni soñar* *sueñas con nada y ya no debes nada*	What do you aim at, Mexican, when you dream? With green dreams, it does no good to dream. You dream with nothing and that you don´t owe

[20] Monsiváis, 1981, p. 35.
[21] *Ídem*, 1981, p. 53.

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Spanish	English
tu casa está pagada, ya no hay que trabajar *ya está ganada la copa en la olimpiada* *soñar no cuesta nada, qué ganas de soñar*	Your house is paid up, you need not work the cup is won in the Olympics, dreaming is free, such a need to dream.
Ah pero eso sí, mañana sí que lo hago *pero eso sí, mañana voy a ir* *pero eso si, mañana sí te pago* *a qué le tiras cuando sueñas sin cumplir?*	Ah, but yes, tomorrow I will do it but yes, tomorrow I shall go but yes, tomorrow I shall pay up what do you aim at by not keeping your word?
A qué le tiras cuando sueñas mexicano? *deja el tesoro que Cuauhtémoc fue a enterrar* *cuántos centavos se te escapan de la mano?* *Buscando un taxi que jamás te ha de llevar*	What do you aim at, Mexican, when you dream? leave the treasure that *Cuauhtémoc* went to bury how many cents escape from your hand? Searching for a taxi that will never take you?
A qué le tiras cuando sueñas mexicano? *que faltan niños pa'poblar este lugar* *sigue soñando que no hay contribuciones* *que ya no hay mordelones, que ya puedes ahorrar* *sigue soñando que el PRI ya no anda en zancos* *que prestan en los bancos, que dejas de fumar*	What do you aim at, Mexican, when you dream? that children are needed to populate this country keep dreaming that there are no taxes that there are no bribers, that you can save keep dreaming that the PRI walks on tilts that the banks will lend, that you stop smoking.
Ah pero eso sí, mañana nos casamos *pero eso sí, mañana te lo doy* *pero eso sí, la última y nos vamos* *A qué le tiras cuando sueñas, soñador?*	Ah but yes, tomorrow we´ll get married ah but yes, tomorrow I will give it to you ah but yes, the last one and we go what do you aim at when you dream, dreamer?

4. "Refrán"

Having discussed the *albur* as a way of expressing, appropriating and manipulating language, as well as a means for establishing social ties and identity of social groups and as a means to transcend crisis and challenge the system, we now approach a different modality of language, one that goes around, avoiding sexual and eschatological references, to constitute itself a vessel of wisdom, morals and conscience. This figure of speech is the *refrán, as in*:

Spanish	English
Todocabe en un jarrito	Everything fits into a little jar,
sabiéndoloacomodar	knowing how to accommodate it all (see Figure 15).

At the beginning of the 16th century, the Spanish language disembarked in Veracruz, and with it came the sayings and proverbs from Europe. This language was imposed and thus began its evolution on the other side of the ocean. Hispanization began and rendered a new society that organized and developed an intimate yet modified relationship, given the circumstances, with the history and culture of Spain. The

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syncretism that came about involves two distinct roots – those proper to the introduced European culture and then the apparent submission of the Meso-American cultures, which never renounced their original cosmovision. This element granted a strong semantic load onto the learning of the so-called 'Iberic Mother Culture' and its imposed customs, in a kind of double-face of conscience.

Like any social and human phenomenon, language is a living entity that finds itself subjected to a constant evolution. As Foucault recognizes, language, like perfume, always carries a subjective burden, when it establishes the act of speaking.[22] It is determined largely on one hand by specific historic and geographic contexts and on the other, by the utilization of grammatical aspects - such as, rhythmics, metrics and rhymes; these are flowerings that endow it with an added value in the literary sense. All the while, language finds itself enriched by the use of rhetorical elements, such as the metaphor and the simile. Given that language undoubtedly carries a subjective charge and as well as a way of perceiving reality, it is through the exchange of ideas that individuals amplify their own knowledge and project it onto more elevated levels by using language. Intelligence thus allows for the creative use of language – in the conjunction of grammar, poetics and ludic actions that have rendered the construction of codes and reinforced the identity of given social groups.

In difference to the *albur*, whose structure is dominated by the masculine gender's point of view and is eminently dialogic, both male and females use the *refrán* in an indistinct manner. It can propitiate dialogism through the figure known as the replication or reply. Hence, the *refrán*, as opposed to the *albur*, is unidirectional. Yet it can set the pace for dialogue, such as:

Spanish	English
Camarón que se duerme, se lo lleva la corriente.	The shrimp that falls sleeps, is carried away by the current.
No todo lo que brilla es oro.	All that glitters is not gold(see Figure 15).
That is, someone can come back with another *refrán*, which either adds or accentuates the initial one.	
No todo lo que no brilla es lodo.	Not everything that does not shine is mud.

[22] See: Foucault,Michel. *The Discourse on Language*. [1971] 1972, Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith.New York: Pantheon.

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Figure 15. Everything fits, the carried-away shrimp, and false gold

The *refrán* is a poetic construction that has proliferated with the intention to transmit teachings and to promote a kind of morality based on experience. There is always a *refrán* for any situation, a kind of proverb dressed in a metaphorical saying decorated in metonyms. Besides the verbal folklore of Mexico, experiences, suspicions, malice and popular sharpness are reflected always with spirit and a touch of liveliness in the transmission of its teachings. Although introduced from Europe and having its origins in fables and proverbs of Hellenic times (and even further back to Mesopotamia), the *refrán* in Mexico has developed local characteristics and terms, giving it a particular tinge understood by Mexicans as *theirs*. Besides, new *refranes* are being created continuously. A Mexican *refrán*? It is a poetic construction that has proliferated with the intention to transmit teachings and learned experiences, to inculcate a kind of morality derived from its message, often using local parole or modisms. Those idioms often are only understood locally (see Figure 16).



Figure 16. Wisdom being passed on within a pre-Columbian family as in the 20th Century in the film*, Los Fernández de Peralvillo,* 1954.

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In the famous novel *Las Tierras Flacas* (1962)[23]by the well-known Mexican writer AgustínYáñez, it is the main character, the villain, Don Epifanio, who speaks in *refranes*. Yáñez has captured the particular and local and rich quality of the *refranes* of Guerrero in Western Mexico. Epifanio's every uttering is a *refrán*, regarding all sorts of matters, thus demonstrating the extraordinary variety that is cultivated in that region of Mexico. Nearly four thousand *refranes* are contained in the novel. Here are a few examples:

Spanish	English
Amor viejo y camino real nunca se deja de andar.	Old love and country road never cease to be trodden.
Amor y dinero a la carasalen.	Love and money come out on the face.
Antes que saber ganar, hay queaprender a perder.	Before knowing how to win, you must learn to lose.
Árbolquecrecetorcidojamássutroncoendereza.	Tree that grows twisted will never straighten its trunk.
Aunque la camisaesanchatambién se rompe a codazos.	Even though the shirt is broad, it still gets torn at the elbows.
Aunque sea pleitoganadovete con cuidado.	Even if it the fight is won, go at it carefully.
Aunquetechille el cochino, no le sueltes el mecate.	Even if the pig squeals, do let go of the rope.
Aunquetediganquesí, espérate a que lo veas.	Even if they tell you Yes, wait till you see it.
Aunque lo quedicen no es, conque lo asegurenbasta.	Even if what they tell you is not, so long as they assure it is enough.
Con amor y aguardiente nada se siente.	With love and spirits nothing hurts.
Bien sabe el diablo a quién se le aparece.	Well does the devil know to whom he appears.
El albur del matrimoniosólo los tarugos lo juegan.	The marriage *albur* only fools play.
De golosos y tragonesestánllenos los panteones.	The cemeteries are filled with sweet-tooths and the greedy.
De la gallinamásviejaresulta el caldomajor.	From the oldest hen, the stew is best.
De la suerte y de la muerte no escapa el débilni el fuerte.	From luck and death, escape neither the weak nor the strong.
De lo perdido lo queaparezca.	From what is lost, whatever appears.
De lo que veas cree muy poco; de lo que te cuenten, nada.	From what you see, believe hardly anything; from what they tell you, nothing.
De que la perra es brava, hasta los de casa muerde.	If the bitch is fierce, she bites even her master.
Desde lejos se conoce al pájaro que es canario.	From afar you can identify the bird that is a canary.
Desde que dejé de dar he conseguido.	Since I stopped giving, I have gotten.
Dineroarrastradinero.	Money drags with it money.
Favor publicado, favor deshonrado.	A published favor, is a dishonored favor.

[23] See: Yáñez,Agustín. 2010. *Las Tierras Flacas*. México: Joaquín Mortiz Eds.

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Spanish	English
Gallo, caballo y mujer, porsuraza has de escoger.	Rooster, horse and woman, by their breed you must choose.
Gatoencogido, brincoseguro.	Crouching cat, a sure jump.
Hay vecesque nada el pato y otrasqueniaguabebe.	They are times when the duck swims and others when he does not even drink water.
Hemosvistocaeriglesias, cuantimásestejacal.	We have seen churches fall, and even more this hut.
La canaengaña, el dientemiente y la arrugadesengaña.	The grey hair fools, the tooth lies and the wrinkle disillusions.
La cobija y la mujer, suavecitashan de ser.	The blanket and the woman soft they ought to be.
Yateconozcocampana, ya no tevuelvo a repicar.	Now I know you, bell. I will not sound you again.

At the same time, Oaxaca's Zapotec historian and writer, Andrés Henestrosa affirms that:

> A saying and a *refrán* tend to make situations concrete and open up a direction; they place into our willingness a decision to take the initial step. And not in a capricious or casual way, sayings and *refranes* are the synthesis of human wisdom accumulated over many years of experiences.[24(OT)]

Effectively, there is always a *refrán* for any situation, because in them the verbal folklore of Mexico as well as experiences, suspicions, malice or popular conflicts are reflected in a spirit of living hope. Any popular saying contains convincing conclusions and commentaries, based on daily life routines, strong life experiences and their main point in teachings, education, transmitting lived experience on the part of who expresses the *refrán*. Henceforth, in the construction of the so-called Mexican identity, the *refrán* can favour a form of education, for it transmits the wisdom of one's predecessors in neat, compact packages.

Refranes aid in resolving problems – because people trust *refranes* – as they are approved by a given consensus (family, peers, associates, circles). They aid in constructing a morality, alternative forms of identity and security. A *refrán* is reaffirmed each time it is uttered. *Refranes* are transmitted by word of mouth, from generation to generation, used in any type of communication, utilizing convincing phrases of the most varied origins. They could have been born in the political realm, in literature, in religion or any other source – even in anonymity. Some *refranes* are based on current living styles. There are others whose validity might fall into disuse because *quotidienne* life changes, while others surge and become established, alongside ever-pervading *refranes. S*ome are of public domain and others are not so

[24] Henestrosa, Andrés, 1985. Cited in Jorge Mejía Prieto, *Albures y refranes de México*. Mexico City: Panorama, p. 7.

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well known. Yet it is considered always good to know that these type of expressions are a resource in any occasion or moment:

Spanish	English (OT)
Refranes y consejos, todos son buenos.	*Refranes* and advice are always good.
Refranes y sustos, hay para todoslos gustos.	*Refranes* and scares, there are for all tastes.
Decir refranes, es decir verdades.	To say *refranes* is to say truths.
Déjate de tanto refrán y empieza a buscar pan.	Stop with all these *refranes* and begin searching for bread.
En cada refrán tienes una verdad.	In each *refrán* you have a truth.
Hombre refranero, medido y certero.	A man, who is a *refrán*sayer, is measured and certain.
Los refranes y las tejas son cosas de casas viejas.	*Refrane*s and clay shingles are things of old houses.
Para todo mal, un refrán, y para todo bien, también.	For every bad thing, a *refrán*,and for every good thing, also.

Taking into account that in Spanish there is a cadence and a kind of rhyme, both the *refrán* and the *albur* are compatible alternatives in detouring bad luck or warning about it:

Spanish	English
Aunque la mona se vista de seda, mona se queda.	Even though the doll dresses in silk, she remains a doll.
El hombre propone, Dios dispone, llega el diablo y todo descompone.	Man proposes, God disposes, comes the Devil and it all discomposes.

Just the same, the *refrán* is moving toward the picaresque, just like there are *albures* that are based on the forms of the *refrán* to communicate their message. Both are poetic constructions – metaphorical language – well-structured and syntactically solvent. Both propitiate conviviality, a step towards living in harmony, sharing moments. They also establish a hierarchy. In the *refrán* the one who says the *refrán* is superior by his experience and is supported by the *refrán* he utters, because of his knowledge – hence wisdom – of the *refrán*. In the *albur*, it is the last utterer that is considered superior. Yet as always theses hierarchies are flexible and continuously transcended, because the scenario and the rules do change.

In conclusion, the *albur* is a dialogic form of cultural rebelry – born to challenge the imposition of a cult language, to make it one's own and to counterattack the rest of the world. Its connotations are in double and even triple meanings, alluding to occult sexual themes in the confrontation of phrases. The *albur* serves in the construction of identity (both individual and of community) by

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means of the response. It is about breaking the solemnity, of letting out a sigh under dire situations as a means of sharing and joking, while the *refrán***,** an oral literary construction that gives security in its transmission of popular wisdom. Thus in agreement with Monsiváis who declares "Popular culture [in Mexico] is today a matter of a daily militant definition in everyfield."[25(OT)]– the understandings, both in the *albur*and the *refrán*, give solidarity, humour, mutual knowledge and a sense of identity amidst the entangled complexity of chaos in Mexico.

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