

Poetic Discipleship and *Traición* in Julián Herbert's *Álbum Iscariote*

Madison Felman-Panagotacos

UCLA

“Será esto  
lo que los viejos poetas llaman  
Traición?”

—Julián Herbert, “Tira de la peregrinación,” *Álbum Iscariote*

In his non-traditional poetry collection *Álbum Iscariote*, Julián Herbert reinterprets a history of Mexican poetry, tracing back to pre-colonial tradition, in order to generate a conflicted discourse of what constitutes a distinctly Mexican identity within destabilized notions of nationality and culture. As his first *poemario* following the publication of *Caníbal: apuntes sobre poesía mexicana reciente*, a meditation on the state of contemporary Mexican poetry as a whole via essays, *Álbum Iscariote* reflects many of Herbert's lines of questioning in his essays. One of the main aspects of Mexican poetry, and, more broadly, poetry as an institution, that Herbert ruminates upon is the concept of the anthology. By posing the questions “who edits and who is included in an anthology?”, “what is an anthology attempting to represent?”, and “can an anthology, or a series of anthologies, really represent “Mexican” poetry?”, Herbert arrives at the conclusion that the practice of anthologizing “Mexican poetry” is plagued by a sense of nationalism that determines who and what is really “Mexican.” Herbert's approach to anthologizing, as exemplified by these essays and his *poemario*, a

collection reminiscent of an anthology in its organization, overwrites spatio-temporal divisions and questions the existence of an invariable national identity, creating a discourse that interrupts essentialist understandings of Mexican poetry. However, as an academic and a poet, the author himself is a participant in the creation and analysis of Mexican poetry, a position that he fundamentally questions throughout the work. Moreover, it is his privileged capacity within academia and as a celebrated poet that he simultaneously critiques, given his hesitations about narrow definitions of *Mexicanidad*. Through his reimagining of genre and subjectivity in *Álbum Iscariote*, Herbert complicates the vision of being Mexican supported by the rhetoric of transculturation and highlights the impossibility of cultural production within a restricted understanding of *Mexicanidad*, while simultaneously questioning his own position as a gatekeeper by constructing himself as a Judas figure.

By adopting the voice of the authorial “yo,” Herbert endows *Álbum Iscariote* with a firsthand narrative of Mexican subjectivity problematized as a result of the process of globalized transculturation. This leads the narrator to examine his own place in Mexican culture and his complicity in its mischaracterization. The cultural allusions—contemporary and ancient, popular and arcane, technological and vestigial—lend specific references to the author’s understanding of this culture. One aspect of these references that becomes conspicuous to the reader is Herbert’s intermingling of allusions to cultural markers specific to Mexico, both contemporary and pre-Columbian, with those from other countries, especially the United States. Even though the cultural concepts mentioned are not confined to an area delimited by a national border, many reproduce contexts specific to political, social, or cultural circumstances pertinent to specified places, an idea theorized by Renato Ortiz and termed *mundialization*. This designation refers to aspects of hegemonic culture that replicate themselves globally, generally through consumption of cultural goods, including news media, entertainment, and social media. While Herbert is engaged with certain aspects of U.S. and global culture, he also maintains a strong connection to his Mexican identity, which produces feelings of guilt because of his irresolute sentiments surrounding poetry, identity, and culture. Due to his position as an academic and creator of Mexican poetry, throughout this *poemario* Herbert contends with the consequences of this status. Indeed, he expresses fear that he is in fact undermining his critique of a traditional understanding of *Mexicanidad* due to his participation in institutions that reify it, a betrayal that is evoked by the title and the subsequent religious imagery throughout the work. The poetry in *Álbum Iscariote* illuminates an

ever-shifting Mexican culture, identity, and literary landscape that are characteristic of García Canclini's theorizations of ongoing hybridization. By this, I mean that via his collection of poetry, Herbert represents a fundamental lack of a static Mexican culture; instead, he depicts it as a hybrid entity that predicates his self-reflection as a poet who undermines traditional notions of culture as essentialist at the same time that, in doing so, he fears he disembodies his own *Mexicanidad*.

*Mediations on Poetry*

In the consecutive poems “Oscura” and “Se hace tú y alumbra oscura (Chismógrafo)”, Herbert explores the transient nature of being a poet, in regards to both the difficulty of composing poetry and the constant change in literary trends. “Oscura” reveals that a couple years have passed without the poetic “yo” successfully producing any poems, a paradoxical disclosure, since it appears within a poem. His writer's block, despite self-discipline in trying to produce, causes him to question the motivation and value in writing: “Me inculcaba el demonio de una negra rabia acústica: ¿para qué escribir poemas / si todo lo que hiere tiene el tacto vacío, usura de una tumba?” (Herbert 2013, 27). An inability to take part in conventional poetic creation forces him to reassess his pertinence to the category of “poet.” “Oscura” is accompanied by an endnote, “Este texto fue escrito por encargo de Eusebio Ruvalcaba para el volumen colectivo *Poemas para un poeta que dejó la poesía*” (Herbert 2013, 151). The original location of this poem highlights the feelings of frustration and defeat experienced by the poet, who then decides to ‘leave poetry.’ As he expounds his process of writers block, the narrator sets forth a collective definition of poetry as a whole, stating, “Todos sabemos que la poesía no es más (ni menos) que una destreza pasajera. / Una destreza que, perdida, se hace tú y alumbra oscura” (Herbert 2013, 28). The final verse sets forth poetry as an entity whose loss ‘makes him,’ therefore defining his existence through the loss of his status as a poet. His lack of poetry also ‘lights up the dark,’ an allusion to Enlightenment thought, which celebrated specifically written knowledge as paramount.

This subversion of typical symbolism also leads into the subsequent poem, whose title repeats the antepenultimate verse. “Se hace tú y alumbra oscura (Chismógrafo)” takes the form of gossip questions posed to five poets: “Miguel Gaona [1] / Maricela Guerrero [2] / Efraín Velasco [3] / María Salgado [4] / Ricardo Castillo [5]” (Herbert 2013, 29)—four of whom are Mexican and one Spanish (Salgado). As a response to the preceding poem, “Se hace tú y alumbra oscura

(Chismógrafo)” reads more like a set of *Mad Libs*, a children’s game that simplifies the French existentialist *cadavre exquis*, than an overt mediation on poetry. However, this take on an “exquisite corpse” reinterprets an established mode of literary production, which actually originated from a parlor game, rather than a specifically literary endeavor. Just like an exquisite corpse, the poem combines written work from multiple sources who have not seen the other contributions. Through the construction of this poem as a written Q&A session, Herbert evokes Morrison’s technique of found footage: a grouping of “chismógrafo,” a neologism that combines the oral tradition of *chisme*, or gossip, with the act of writing (from the Greek γράφω, to write). The word *chisme* also recalls a stereotypically lower-class activity of discussing other peoples’ affairs, one that would not be written and would be deemed uncouth by members of high society. Moreover, the first verse of the poem, “Poesía eres tú” (Herbert 2013, 29) sets up Herbert’s central problematic that recurs throughout the collection: what is contemporary Mexican poetry? Herbert’s response in this poem seems to be the adoption of quotidian activity into written tradition; his acknowledgement that literary production spans beyond the traditional denotation of “poet” alludes to the hybridization of mass, popular, and high culture into an amalgamated Mexican culture. The adoption of literary sources and structures that defy normative notions of poetry seems to suggest a response to the previous question that undermines elitist understandings of poetry.

#### *Uncertainty and Hybridization*

Another aspect of Herbert’s questioning is the lyric *yo*’s expression of uncertainty surrounding a stable understanding of Mexican poetry and culture, in addition to his role as a poet and scholar. Herbert expresses this uncertainty regarding the state of Mexican poetry and his position within it by writing *sous rature*, or “under erasure,” a literary technique described by Jacques Derrida as printing text with words crossed out, but still legible. Nearly the entirety of the section *Light is calling* from the poem “Bill Morrison” is printed in this style, with only the phrases “*Light is calling* / ... luz no usada / ... la belleza caduca” appearing fully legible (Herbert 2013, 61). The remainder of the section reads as,

*Light is calling.*

~~el aire se serena~~  
~~y viste de hermosura y luz no usada~~  
~~michaelgordon cuando suena~~  
~~la música extremada~~  
~~por vuestra sabia mano gobernada~~  
~~a cuyo son divino~~  
~~el alma que en olvido está sumida~~  
~~torna a cobrar el tino~~  
~~y memoria perdida~~  
~~de su origen primera esclarecida~~  
~~y como se conoce~~  
~~en suerte y pensamiento se mejora~~  
~~el oro desconoce~~  
~~que el vulgo vil adora~~  
~~la belleza caduca engañadora~~

Image 1

According to Madan Sarup, the use of writing “under erasure” indicates that the word or phrase is “inadequate yet necessary,” a signifier unable to fully articulate the meaning of the signified, but without a better option available to the author (Sarup 1993, 33). The remaining crossed out text, known as ‘trace,’ reveals that the signifier’s “meaning is a matter not of essence but of *différance*,” suggesting that the understanding of the trace emerges not just from its meaning, but also from the meaning that is not present (Norton 2000, 57). In this way, writing *sous rature* communicates “the illusion of presence,” where meaning exists in a state of being and non-being at the same time (Reilly 2002, 29). Herbert articulates his preoccupation with existing as a subject afflicted by such uncertainty toward the end of the *poemario*, when he writes

Me pregunto si la sabiduría  
 no es un fantasma que  
 —como en un cuento de James—  
 rentaba una casa.  
 Un fantasma desahuciado por las fluctuaciones  
 de la oferta y de la demanda. (Herbert 2013, 148)

This manifestation of Herbert’s uncertainty, especially through the use of writing *sous rature*, characterizes the author’s questioning of the ability to produce poetry in such a globalized age, in addition to whether a literature with such globalized influences can be said to be specifically “Mexican.”

Societies adopt characteristics of extralocal cultures as a result of globalization, a process that results in an inherent hybridity, a mixing. According to García Canclini, hybridization indicates a disintegration of the binary, such as that between “Mexican” and “foreign” or “modern” and “traditional,” as mass culture disseminates extensively via new forms of media. This process is made visible throughout the poem “Karaoke,” whose third section, entitled *F WORD*, begins with the stanza,

\_ / \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ // [h.]  
 \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ //  
 \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ //  
 \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ //  
 \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ [t.]  
 / \_ / \_ / \_ / \_  
 / \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ / \_ [h.]

Image 2

(Herbert 2013, 34), an imitation of the rhythm of the country ballad “En la frontera” (1980) by Juan Gabriel, a Mexican music icon known as El Divo de Juárez. In this section, the U.S. conception of the malediction the “F word” takes on a new, Mexicanized meaning: *la frontera*. The aspects of hybridized culture, juxtaposed with references to Mexico and the United States individually, manifest the conditions in which culture exists in the borderlands of Mexico—as Mexican culture, U.S. culture, and a hybridization of the two. This *frontera* also exists between the dichotomous understanding of culture as ‘modern’ and ‘traditional,’ a dialogue that has characterized discussions of Latin American development throughout the process of modernization from the 1950s until the 1980s. As Mexico’s “development” led to increased urbanization, indigenous populations migrated to larger cities from rural areas and pueblos, causing a hybridization of autochthonous culture with popular and high cultures.

The poem “Karaoke” as a whole depicts the merging of these cultural markers through his juxtaposition of poetic renderings of works by Octavio Paz, Los Invasores de Nuevo León, and Juan Gabriel through the three parts. The first section of “Karaoke,” *BREVE MANUAL DE POESÍA MEXICANA*, is a three-verse poem, whose first line (“un colibri”) and signature from Octavio Paz suggest an allusion to Paz’s succinct poem “La exclamación”:

Quieto  
           no en la rama  
 en el aire  
           No en el aire  
 en el instante  
           el colibrí. (Paz 262)

As a famed poet, essayist, diplomat, and winner of the 1990 Nobel Prize in Literature, Paz is exalted as a canonical contributor to Hispanic culture as a whole. In addition to many of his works of fiction, some of which explore conceptions of *Mexicanidad*, Paz's essayistic publications and edited collection of poetry attempt to define what Mexican culture should comprise. His 1966 poetry collection, *Poesía en movimiento: México, 1915-1966*, with collaborators Homero Aridjis, Alí Chumacero and José Emilio Pacheco, aims to explore 50 years of Mexican poetry, focusing on its "ruptura" with previous generations (Paz 1976), an understanding that Herbert questions in *Canibal*. Additionally, the inclusion of the phrase "manual de poesía mexicana" in the title of the first section of "Karaoke" alludes to both Paz's collection and Herbert's previous publication, *Canibal*, which each aim to describe a new viewpoint on the subject. This section referencing Paz appears on the same page as the second section, *ANTIGUO ANÓNIMO CHINO*, which references the music of norteño group Los Invasores de Nuevo León at the bottom of the page. The verses here are a rewriting of the song "La playa sola", recorded by Los Invasores in 1998. While a majority of the lyrics are slightly altered, such as the elimination of words or the changing of some verb conjugations, there is one lyric that stands out: "sanhsuan" (Herbert 2013, 33). This phrase refers to a neo-Confucianist ideology under the Cheng-shih dynasty in 240-249 A.D. China, when Taoist philosophy led to a revival of Confucianism nearly a millennium after Confucius (Demiéville 1986, 828-829). *San-hsüan* signifies the three mysteries in Confucianism, those of the Lao-tzu, the Chuang-tzu, and the *Book of changes* (Demiéville 1986, 829), but in the context of "Karaoke" it replaces the word "palmar," or palm grove, in the "La playa sola" lyrics. The second part of the term, *hsüan*, comes "from the first paragraph of the *Tao-te ching*, where it refers to that which exists (*yu*) and that which has no existential being (*wu*) as constituting the "mystery of mysteries" (Demiéville 1986, 829). In this way, Herbert infuses the lyrics of Los Invasores de Nuevo León not only with an air of antiquity, but also with a contrast between the existing and the existential. The importance of this lies in Herbert's redefining of important cultural practices, an interpretation that likens ancient customs, elite literary production, and popular music

as commensurate stimulating contributions.

The coexistence of Octavio Paz, Los Invasores de Nuevo León, and Juan Gabriel not only highlights a generational difference but also an opposition in typical imagery. Even though Octavio Paz and Los Invasores fall on either side of Juan Gabriel generationally, with Octavio Paz's birth in 1914, Los Invasores' founding in 1978 and Juan Gabriel's birth in 1950, they both embody a much more traditional, masculine image than that of JuanGa. Gabriel, known for his aesthetic flamboyance and modern gender fluidity, acts in direct opposition to the *machista* imagery of Paz and Los Invasores. The varying takes on gender throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as represented by these three public figures, fosters a non-linear historical sequence, a further complication of the ancient-modern dichotomy. According to Herbert, the generational divisions that result from these sometimes-arbitrary temporal breaks "repiten unos gestos heredados, fuera de la historia, fuera del tiempo—o, más bien, inmersos en otro tiempo, cíclico y cerrado" (Herbert 2010, 21). By situating his seemingly autobiographical album among important earlier figures of Mexican culture, Herbert attempts to reflect upon the impossibility of creating a linear temporal understanding of culture and his own positionality in cultural traditions.

In *Album Iscariote*, Herbert positions himself as a member of an older generation, unable to grapple with the shift toward a younger culture, including music, literature, and political movements. One of the most poignant references to modern Mexican political culture appears in the poem "Autorretrato a los 41," which alludes to the "YoSoy132" movement that emerged during the 2012 election, which resulted in the selection of Enrique Peña Nieto as President of Mexico. Although this poem references the movement showing solidarity with 131 university students who protested Peña Nieto's campaign and were widely denigrated, its references extend beyond this Mexican context. "Autorretrato a los 41" is implicitly (and explicitly, in the endnotes) suggested to be read while listening to the song "Losing My Edge" by the United States musical group LCD Soundsystem. In this song, LCD Soundsystem's front man James Murphy critiques both young hipsters who build their identity upon an engagement with esoteric music and the group of aging hipsters Murphy belongs to, who attempt to keep up. Even though Herbert enumerates an impressive list of 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin American poetry references, including those to "Amiri Baraka / y The Nuyorican Café" (Herbert 2013, 73) he demoralizingly continues to 'lose his edge' as he enters middle age and undergoes a midlife crisis. As Herbert reminds the readers in the first two verses, "No soy un poeta joven. / No soy un poeta joven"



(Herbert 2013, 72); he follows this by naming different cultural and political moments when he was “joven,” such as “Lo fui cuando Pinochet gobernaba a los chilenos” (Herbert 2013, 72) and “Lo fui cuando José Eugenio Sánchez publicó / *El mar es un espejismo del cielo*” (Herbert 2013, 73). Unlike the allusions to popular culture that dominate in earlier poems like “Aníbal Superstar,” such as “P.T. Barnum / [and] la mamá de Dumbo” (Herbert 2013, 14), the references in “Autorretrato a los 41” go beyond a cursory nostalgia. Herbert situates his pertinence in a bygone sociopolitical moment, now finding himself surrounded by a literary culture that he regards as impossible to navigate. As Herbert notes in *Canibal*, the hybridization of high, popular, and mass cultures generates an “imposibilidad individual de asimilar todos los productos de la industria cultural” (Herbert 2010, 18), leaving some outside of the new, hybridized culture – in this instance, Herbert and other poets from the 1970s. Through this demoralizing self-reflection, Herbert highlights the futility of attempting to write poetry in such a globalized age. However, this futility does not keep him from continuing to produce it, despite his assertion, “Ahora no escribo más versos. / Ahora no escribo más versos” (Herbert 2013, 72).

#### *Divisions and Heterogeneity*

Paralleling the discourse on cultural borders (and their permeability) in the content of the text, Herbert creates borders within the text itself by juxtaposing verbal against visual poetry and by separating the *poemario* into distinctive sections. Each of these four sections are titled ‘Episodios,’ the fourth of which bears the subtitle “(A New Hope),” invoking a comparison to the Hollywood film series *Star Wars*, whose fourth iteration is titled *Episode IV: A New Hope*. Not only does this reference serve to divide the book into four sections, it also creates a cinematic allusion that readers globally can relate to. The collection itself is not just sectioned by the four ‘episodios,’ but also by the juxtaposition of verbal poetry with images. Each of the *fragmentos* of the poem “Tira de peregrinación” is separated by a different image from the Aztec codex of that name, with other photographs and digital illustrations inserted as well. The most brusque transition from verbal to visual imagery takes place with the verse, “Pero antes, el mensaje de nuestros patrocinadores:” (Herbert 2013, 37) before transitioning to a dozen pages of photographs. This line recalls the sponsoring of entertainment programs, alluding to the division of the collection into episodes of *Star Wars*, each of which is preceded by a series of advertisements and previews. Although there does exist clear demarcation between ‘Episodios’ and an abutment of verbal and

visual imagery, some instances blur the lines between the two. The photographs that appear following the message from “nuestros patrocinadores” have lines of poetry superimposed on them. The blurring of boundaries between poetry and images, coupled with distinctive borders elsewhere within *Álbum Iscariote*, echoes Herbert’s discourse on permeable borders between culture and consumption, high and popular cultures, regarding hybridization as a result of globalization and development. Beyond lending a physical representation to these seemingly stable yet permeable boundaries, Herbert’s demarcated *poemario* reproduces his posture toward *Mexicanidad*: it is incohesive despite its state as one entity.

The poem “Tira de la peregrinación” describes, throughout its twenty-two sub-poems that close the work, a migration from southern Mexico to the border regions of both Mexico and the United States. By paralleling his own migration with the pilgrimage of his Aztec ancestors, Herbert once again reasserts his pertinence to a pre-Columbian informed *Mexicanidad*. *Fragmento 16. Sobre la bestia interferida de puntos* makes this movement explicit as another migration: “Sigo la peregrinación pero / cada que llego a su desembocadura / un juez de línea marca fuera de lugar” (Herbert 2013, 128). The specification that the judge marks a point as ‘out of bounds’ denotes the typical migrant experience, with laws arbitrarily deciding a national boundary in order to exclude others, in this case Latin American migrants. The inversion of the migration path, from southward to northward, undermines this comparison by emphasizing his destination as the United States, rather than Mexico, effectively evoking the infamous route of “la Bestia” undertaken by migrants from Guatemala to El Paso, as discussed by Óscar Martínez in *The Beast*.

The poems up to this point describe a movement from southern to northern Mexico, mentioning the states “Querétaro” (Herbert 2013, 27) and “Nuevo León” (Herbert 2013, 33), followed by “Aguascalientes,” (Herbert 2013, 36) both the city and the former casino in Ciudad Juárez, famous to both Mexican and U.S. citizens, and the border town of “Laredo” (Herbert 2013, 34) that exists on both sides of the border. This “extraordinaria procesión de sur a norte” continues in the *fragmento 1. buecanías. un bueco tira* with illustrations of license plates from the Great Plains and Southwestern U.S. states of South Dakota, Nevada, Nebraska, and Wyoming (Herbert 2013, 124). The constant movement, not just throughout this poem, but also throughout the collection as a whole, demonstrates a nomadic quality that Herbert portrays unfavorably; in referring to himself as “un hombre sin país,” Herbert is conscious of his own lack of pertinence to a globalized Mexico (Herbert 2013, 78).

Despite the situation of this poem within the fourth section, *Episodio 4 (A New Hope)*, that explicitly declares the author's hopefulness, he laments his transnational condition, writing, "lloro / porque sigo la peregrinación" (Herbert 2013, 125). The movement described here parallels another migration portrayed in *Álbum Iscariote*, between pages 80 and 129 there are 16 images from the Códice Boturini, an Aztec codex also known as "Tira de la peregrinación," or "the Pilgrimage Strip," that visually depicts the Mexica people's journey from Aztlán to the Valle de México to establish the city of Tenochtitlán. The title of the poem itself, *bucanías*, reinforces a sadness and loneliness connected to migration. It references a bilingual song in Spanish and Nahuatl from a rural community in the state of Morelos that, in the epigraph, Herbert admits, "Desconozco el significado de la palabra que da título a la canción, así como el sentido íntegro de la letra en náhuatl. Pero el fragmento cantado en español habla de ausencia, migración y tristeza:

Me voy lejos  
 a lejanas tierras  
 donde yo pueda llorar  
 mi desventura  
 me voy por ti  
 donde tú no sepas  
 sí, corazón. (Herbert 2013, 155)

The coherent narrative of migration (as opposed to the incohesive nature of the divided poemario) toward and across the U.S.-Mexico border that Herbert constructs throughout the collection, but peaks in "Tira de la peregrinación," leads the reader to experience the tragedy of a "yo lírico" undergoing continual movement without ever reaching its destination (Íñiguez 2017, 32). Furthermore, Herbert's replication of this tragic migration, without fully understanding the primary sources he cites, reveals his insecurity regarding a perceived lack of belonging among a Mexican culture.

#### *Globalized Technology, Products, and Culture*

Herbert illustrates the impossibility of determining an essentialized Mexican culture by incorporating exemplars of globalized culture at the same time that he evokes ancestral artifacts and practices. Through the spread of capital, technology, and ideas, globalization leads to the increased contact of market economies and cultural products. Throughout *Álbum Iscariote*, Herbert mentions products from the United States that are present in Mexico. In the verses, "[En el andén de la línea / 9 se lee: "Nuevo / Yogurt. Más fruta sabor producto".]" (Herbert 2013, 125) from

*Fragmento 15. Sísifo nómada y chichijó de relatos*, Herbert describes an advertisement viewed while waiting for the metro line 9 in the Ciudad de México. While this yogurt is not specified as an American product, the use of the word “Yogurt” instead of the Spanish *yogur* suggests that the product is not of Mexican origin, but from an Anglophone country. By mentioning “un envase de Coca-Cola conmemorativo de las navidades del 70” (Herbert 2013, 117), including the brand name, Herbert clarifies that the merchandise does come from the Coca-Cola Company, based in the United States. The mention that the bottle of Coca-Cola is “conmemorativo de las navidades del 70” highlights the status of this item as a celebratory artifact, held onto for decades after its production, changing it from a mass-produced aspect of popular culture into an heirloom. The commemoration of an item as prestigious recalls the treatment of ancient artifacts, such as the Aztec codices mentioned in *Álbum Iscariote*, a comparison that highlights the importance of modern consumerism as parallel to the foundation of Tenochtitlán. In *fragmento 4. Hang Ten*, the author inserts colloquialisms in English that would be easily comprehensible to non-native speakers, such as “Hang Ten: / no hay nada nuevo bajo el Mall” (Herbert 2013, 90). While there is a Spanish equivalent of the word “mall,” the conception of the American mall in global culture references perceptions of Americans engaging in consumerism as a leisure activity. Furthermore, “no hay nada nuevo bajo el mall” references a Shakespearian sonnet that begins with the verses, “If there be nothing new, but that which is / Hath been before, how are our brains beguil’d” (Shakespeare 1996, 1-2). This poem, “Sonnet 59”, celebrates the continuous creation of new culture, noting that if there were no innovation, they would be betrayed. It continues, “Even of five hundred courses of the sun, / Show me your image in some antique book” (Shakespeare 1996, 6-7), sparking a comparison between elements in contemporary and ‘antique’ cultures, including one between Herbert and Shakespeare.

Contextualized within the space of the shopping mall, the title “Hang Ten” takes on a new meaning: an allusion to the surfer brand, popular in the 1960s and 70s, whose logo of two bare footprints references the surfing maneuver of “hanging” ten toes over the edge of the board. On the page opposite this *fragmento* appears an image from the Códice Boturini of a man crying at the mountain Coatepetl, with footprints running along the bottom of the image. The association of the Mexica imagery with consumerism in the spatial referent of the mall continues until the final verses of the fragment: “Pero qué / sombreros tan encantadores” (Hanging 2013, 90). This line assumedly refers to the hats produced by the “Hang Ten” brand, but also to the shape

of the mountains in the following image that vaguely resemble hats, a further correlation of ancient and contemporary cultures. The juxtaposition of the Mexica traditions with Herbert's misreading of said imagery in his poetry generates a misinterpretation of the tenets of his identity, viewing consumption as paramount to its understanding. Additionally, these final verses depict a general indifference to the misunderstanding of autochthonous culture and imagery as it becomes hybridized with high and popular cultures through the final verses. Rather than attempting to generate a more accurate reading of the transmogrified imagery, the poet contents himself with admiring the popular hats. By portraying consumption of U.S. goods as comparable to autochthonous artifacts, Herbert problematizes a modernity of globalization, resulting in a collapse of the tradition he continuously misreads.



Image 3

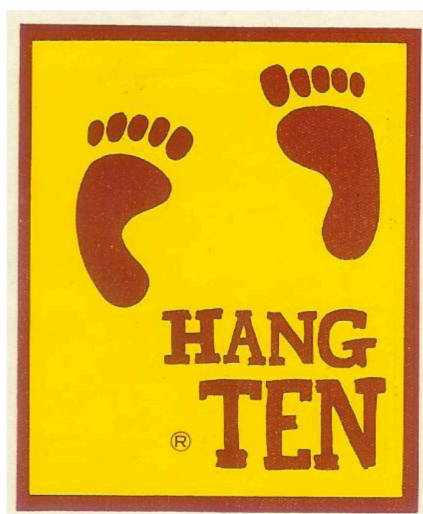


Image 4

Through the verbal and visual imagery surrounding language, in addition to the frequent usage of code switching, Herbert highlights the connection between language and nationhood. *Álbum Iscariote* begins with an epigraph from evolutionary scientist Frank Ryan's *Volution*, a book that exposes the hypocrisy inherent in Charles Darwin's position on hybridity in his seminal work, *On the Origin of Species*—that, while being the result of two similar progenitors, hybridization creates a radically new specimen. Ryan asserts, “the coalescing genomes of hybridization come from closely related species rather than, say, a host and a life form from an entirely different kingdom... But the extent of the differences should not be underestimated” (Ryan in *Álbum* 8). This citation, specifically, resonates with the conflicting vision of hybridity expressed throughout *Álbum Iscariote*. Herbert thus establishes hybridity, evolution, and dissent as central themes to his work through the use of this epigraph. It is followed by two pages with six quotations, the third of which is from Kenneth Burke: “Una obra posee forma en la medida que parte de ella lleva al lector a anticipar otra parte, a complacerse con la secuencia” (Herbert 2013, 9). Beyond the content of the quotation itself, another integral aspect regarding its inclusion at the beginning of this collection is Burke's position as a highly regarded literary theorist from the United States. Despite Burke's nationality, in addition to the inclusion of a quotation by another U.S. author, Robert Creeley, but in English, Burke's quotation is translated from his native English into Spanish. While most translations are done into English in order to allow for a larger global readership, this translation inverts the traditional asymmetrical dynamic of mundialization by translating from English into Spanish. It also asserts the consequence of the regional in a globalized system that emphasizes the transnational—in this case, the use of English as the *lingua franca*.

Herbert furthers his transgression of the normalized usage of English as the dominant international language with his frequent inclusion of Nahuatl. Just as Herbert code switches seamlessly between Spanish and English, he does the same with Spanish and Nahuatl, writing in *fragmento 14: Aquí se cuenta*, “Otra manera de referirlo es / acamatl: / grietas en el amatl: / signos sin tlacuilo” (Herbert 2013, 122). Rather than using the Spanish words “desembocadura,” “papel” and “pintor,” respectively, Herbert uses their Nahuatl equivalent. Assumedly, for most readers of *Álbum Iscariote*, a currently untranslated collection, Spanish is a much more comprehensible language. Due to the popularity of English as a second language globally, it is likely that many of these readers also understand the code switching into English. In this context, Herbert's choice to include Nahuatl sporadically renders

itself conspicuous, especially with the inclusion of a large portion of text in Nahuatl from the Aubin Codex, a written and pictographic history depicting the mythical migration of the Mexica people, up to the year 1520. The passage,

8 tecpatl / 8 tecpatl xihuitl / yc omiquanique y vixachtitlan yn /  
mexica. / 12 tecpatl / auh niman yc comiquanique yn tecpayocan /  
yn mexica. / 13 calli, 1 tochtli, 2 acatl / Ypan nauhxiuhtique / y  
noncan tecpayoca / oncan ympan mochiuh in yaoyavaloloque /  
oncan micque yn itoca tecpatzin / vitzilivitzin / no yehuatl in  
tetepantzin / oncan ympan molpi / in xivilt / ycpac vetz tlequavilt  
yn tecpayo. (*Códice Aubin*, f. 14 r). (Herbert 2013, 121)

describes aspects of the Aztec calendar in relation to their migration; although the content of this fragment is not essential for the understanding of the surrounding text, the cultural importance of the Aubin Codex is paramount. Within the context of *Álbum Iscariote*, code switching and translation function as an apt way of situating “the divisions between texts, languages, traditions, cultures and peoples” in a postmodern world since “translation is always a hybrid” (Littau 1997, 81). The process of hybridization, in highlighting differences between regions, rearticulates and reaffirms subjectivities regarding citizenship; thus, from globalized acculturation, people become more conscious of their own status regarding nation and subjectivity. In code switching to and from Nahuatl and quoting an artifact important to the history of Mexico and the Mexica people, Herbert highlights the connection between language, subjectivity and citizenship, which includes a fusion of indigenous, European, and other foreign-influenced elements of popular, mass, and high cultures.

Vienen a ti  
inscritos en vasijas  
que no querrás deletrear:

```
<object style="height: 390px; width: 640px"><param name="movie" value="http://www.youtube.com/v/AefmKoP723E?
version=3"><param name="allowFullScreen" value="true"><param name="allowScriptAccess" value="always"><embed src=
"http://www.youtube.com/v/AefmKoP723E?version=3" type="application/x-shockwave-flash" allowfullscreen="true"
allowScriptAccess="always" width="640" height="390"></object>
<object style="height: 390px; width: 640px"><param name="movie" value="http://www.youtube.com/v/r-Spdpd2_as?
version=3"><param name="allowFullScreen" value="true"><param name="allowScriptAccess" value="always"><embed src
="http://www.youtube.com/v/r-Spdpd2_as? version=3" type="application/x-shockwave-flash" allowfullscreen="true"
allowScriptAccess="always" width="640" height="390"></object>
```

visible no visible: códice.

#### Image 5

Beyond political, cultural, and linguistic influences, “science, technology, consumption, all are important vectors of the globalization process,” as well (Ortiz 2016, 403). With the advent and popularization of the Internet, technological advances play an increasingly relevant role in globalization and the consumption of

popular culture. In the *fragmento* 9. *Vasijas*, the poetic voice quickly shifts from Spanish to hypertext in Figure 5 (Herbert 2013, 105). Within this hypertext are hyperlinks to YouTube, a site popular among younger generations as a mass disseminator of videos, ranging from music videos to pirated full-length Hollywood movies to instructional videos to clips of people playing video games. The use of YouTube as a referent highlights the multiplicity of mass culture, in two ways. First, this means of sharing mass culture serves as a sort of equalizer; elements of popular and high culture are disseminated on the same platform. Additionally, rather than an individual engagement, “the age of postmodern (electronic) production turns *from the one to the many*, because this virtual presence of all ‘versioners’ of the text in the hypertext environment, and the virtual presence of all versions” (Littau 1997, 91). Not only can users of YouTube engage by watching videos, they can also participate by adding comments, by indicating their likes and dislikes, and by uploading their own content, all of which in turn become visible to other users. The idea of the shift “from the one to the many,” borrowed from Matei Calinescu, reflects the change in how people engage with culture of all sorts.

While traditional forms of culture, like literature, are generally produced by a single author, hypertext and computer technology, theorizes Karen Littau, “can literally undermine the hierarchical separation between the so-called main text and its versions, thus...reconfiguring our conceptions of authorship, originality, and...translation” by “mak[ing] visible the entire production history of a text” (Littau 1997, 81). These two lines of hypertext indicate a height and width in pixels, describing the size of a video or an image. Additionally, they each contain an address that should direct to a different YouTube video, a form of mass culture that can be easily enjoyed from any device that has an Internet connection. The hypertext itself acts as a “código,” rendering “visible” the construction of the final product itself. However, in reality, neither of the hyperlinks connects to anything; instead, the code is an incomprehensible accumulation of letters, numbers, and symbols. Rather than providing the reader with any sort of information, the inclusion of these links only serves to overwhelm and confuse, while directing to no actual Internet address. While the globalization of technology in theory should be facilitating the diffusion of information, Herbert suggests that it actually leads to nowhere. This critique of technology, and the globalizing forces that advance its growth, reflect Herbert’s perception of globalization as precipitating crises of citizenships, subjectivities, and cultural productions. Herbert addresses this aspect of globalization in the poem



“Aníbal Superstar” by writing, “wikipedia / cualquier otra siniestra criatura que hoy le informa a este mundo hacia dónde” (Herbert 2013, 14). Rather than providing information for the Wikipedia user, the technology leads them into an unknown, “hacia dónde.” With his clear diction in these lines, defining an online encyclopedia as a “siniestra criatura,” Herbert expresses a pessimistic view of the globalization of technological culture, which he affirms through his usage of nonsensical hypertext that communicates no real information, despite its express purpose of making visible the construction of the final product.

*The Iscariot Family Album*

Looking at the entire book, the collection itself “funciona como un álbum familiar desordenado,” assumedly for the Iscariot family, as alluded to in the title (Íñiguez 2017, 31). A family album usually contains photographs of and information about the family in question. Toward the end of *Álbum Iscariote*, in *fragmento* 17 of “Tira,” appear a set of 9 photographs; rather than depicting one family in particular, these photographs were sourced from a flea market in Berlin, “el Flohmarkt de Mauerpark / cientos de cajas: fotos viejas anónimas / a cincuenta centavos cada una” (Herbert 2013, 130-1). The only photograph that is accompanied by any information is of an empty kitchen, followed by the lines

(Herbert 2013, 132):

*This is a bad picture of  
Kitchen. I took it with  
the camera standing on  
stom - it appears too  
large in the foreground -  
window to street. There  
are 4 feet between  
stom & pier. Open Caser  
that of dishmarket.*

Image 6

This scanned copy of handwriting on the back of the photograph provides no information about the photographer or the people depicted in the other photos. The only thing the reader learns is that the photographer, like Herbert, questions his or her artistic output. While this photograph is the only one without a human subject, the

other ones do not show people clearly or doing anything that would inform the viewer with any details about them. The lack of coherent information about these subjects reflects Herbert's verses claiming that "El azar es un álbum. Un muro / de fragmentos humanos. Una Tira / de la peregrinación" (Herbert 2013, 133). The anonymity of these 'fragmentos humanos' allows the author to furnish the album with information about whomever – in this case, the Iscariot family. By describing *Álbum Iscariote* as "un nuevo autorretrato" (Herbert 2013, 66) Herbert achieves the insertion of the author as a character embodiment of Judas Iscariot, the biblical figure who betrayed Jesus, which personalizes this family album by emphasizing the authorial "yo," therefore taking on his own burden of guilt.

The title *Álbum Iscariote* itself introduces an integral aspect of the *poemario's* religious imagery. As the title suggests, most of the religious references throughout the book focus on Christianity; *Iscariote* refers to Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve Apostles and betrayer of Jesus. In the poem "Bill Morrison," Herbert references the title with the stanza,

[un]

Álbum Iscariote  
 Vienen saurios al Monte de los Olivos.  
 Cantan; olivácea la piel, aceituna  
 la cuenca sin tejido donde asoma su  
*Te Deum*, el sermón  
 bótox de un ruego: 'Que ciertas cosas de  
 la poesía es mejor  
 no saberlas del todo. Por  
 una suerte de modestia *mística*.'

'Que ponerlo más claro  
 resulta pusilánime.'

'Que tenemos informantes  
 en el próximo Destino.'" (Herbert 2013, 58)

The referenced Monte de los Olivos, or Mount Olivet, is described in the Bible as the location of Jesus's ascension into heaven. Additionally, the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus went to pray after the Last Supper and Judas brought Roman soldiers to crucify him, is said to be on Mount Olivet.

Each of the verses "Mi condición adánica me impide sentarme entre los que comen. / Mi condición satánica me impide sentarme entre los que lloran" (Herbert 2013, 88) implicate the author as taking the place of Judas within the work. The

adjective ‘adánica,’ or ‘Adamic,’ refers to Adam, the Bible’s first man, who gives rise to the Fall of Man and Original Sin; by attributing this characteristic to him, Herbert describes himself as a human, condemned with Original Sin. He also represents himself as ‘satanic,’ a characteristic also attributed to Judas Iscariot in the Bible verses “Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve” (Luke 22:3) and “Jesus answered them, ‘Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil!’ (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him” (John 6:70-1). Herbert refers again to his status as a Judas figure by alluding to this betrayal in the verses “¿Será esto / lo que los viejos poetas llaman / Traición?” (Herbert 2013, 122). Taking into account the context of globalization, hybridization, and national subjectivities, the authorial betrayal and guilt relates to his problematized identity as a postmodern poet who undermines the “viejos poetas.” By depicting himself as guilty, specifically using the word *traición*, which can be translated as ‘treason’ in addition to ‘betrayal,’ Herbert insinuates that by questioning his poetic predecessors he somehow undermines his pertinence to a continuous history of Mexican poetry.

### *Conclusion*

The authorial “yo” figure present throughout *Album Iscariote* embodies the discourse on problematized identity within Mexico and the precarious aspects of defining subjectivities based on nationalities. Herbert expresses a critical perspective on assigning identities with the verses “Los fragmentos humanos / solo son discernibles / cuando no los defines,” a stance that reflects hybridization’s lack of static understandings of cultures (Herbert 2013, 136). The discourse on borders through poetry in the collection represents globalization, and the resulting mundialization of culture, as impacting the intermingling of subjectivities through technology, cultural influences, and consumerism. At the same time that Herbert participates in aspects of globalized culture, he invokes his Mexican identity through references to pre-Columbian history and artifacts, which indicates an attempt to assert his Mexican nationality as prevailing. In keeping with the influence of García Canclini’s theories on hybridity and modernity, Herbert’s work results in a vision of Mexican culture as having porous borders, thereby allowing transculturation to happen continuously, and being full of contradictions between tradition and modernity. Since the delineations of a particularly “Mexican” culture and literary tradition become blurred, Herbert questions his ability to fit into the category of

“Mexican poet.” Furthermore, rather than glorifying his contribution to an ever-changing landscape of poetry in Mexico by alluding to himself as a Christ-like figure, Herbert titles his work *Album Iscariote*, referencing the infamous biblical character Judas Iscariot. The author comes to embody a Judas figure through his rejection of previous generational traditions, situating himself as a disciple of Mexican poetry, just as Judas began as a disciple of Jesus. However, as evidenced by the existence of *Album Iscariote* itself, he refuses to renounce his pertinence to the tradition of Mexican poetry. Beyond the literary investigation that results in Herbert’s self-enacted status as a Judas figure, *Album Iscariote* serves as an exploration of unstable notions of culture, identity, and nationhood that espouses anti-essentialist and diachronic methods of understanding culture.

### Works Cited

- Acosta, Abraham. 2014. *Thresholds of Illiteracy*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Calinescu, Matei. 1991. “From the One to the Many. Pluralism in Today’s Thought.” In Hoesterey, Ingeborg. *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991: 156-174.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Demiéville, Paul. 1986. “Philosophy and religion from Han to Sui.” In Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, eds. *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 1, The Ch’in and Han Empires, 221 B.C. – A.D. 220*. Cambridge University Press: 1986. 808-872.
- García Canclini, Néstor. 1998. *Culturas híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*. México: Grijalbo.
- González Rodríguez, Sergio. 2012. *The Femicide Machine*. Translated by Michael Parker-Stainback. London: Semiotext(e).
- Herbert, Julián. *Album Iscariote*. Ediciones Era: 2013.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Canibal*. Ed. Javier de la Mora de la Peña. Postemporáneos: 2010.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2016. *The Singles*. Mexico: Gobierno del Estado de Coahuila de Zaragoza, Secretaría de Cultura de Coahuila.

- Herbert, Julián and Laurent Portejoie. 2014. "Polaroids borderine. Polaroids on the Borderline", *Arquine* (69): 6-11.
- Higashi Díaz, Alejandro. 2016. "Consecuencias cognitivas de la intervención editorial en la poesía mexicana contemporánea," *Valenciana* (9: 18): 35-66.
- Íñiguez, Edgardo. 2017. "Poesía, muerte y tejido social: necroescrituras en *Álbum Iscariote* de Julián Herbert," *Mitologías boy* (15): 21-34.
- Littau, Karen. 1997. "Translation in the Age of Postmodern Production: From Text to Intertext to Hypertext," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* (XXXIII: 1): 81-96.
- Martínez, Óscar. 1994: *Border People*. Arizona: University of Arizona Press.
- Norton, Judy. 2000. *Narcissus Sous Rature: Male Subjectivity in Contemporary American Poetry*. Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press.
- Ortiz, Renato. 2016. "Mundialization/Globalization," *Theory, Culture & Society* (23: 2-3): 401-3.
- Paz, Octavio. 2012. *The Poems of Octavio Paz*. New York: New Directions Books.
- Paz, Octavio and Ali Charmaceno, José Emilio Pacheco, Homero Aridjis. 1976. *Poesía en movimiento: México 1915-1966*. Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores.
- Reilly, Anne Kathleen. 2002. *The Textual Dimensions of Post-Structuralist Thought*. Diss. The University of Wisconsin – Madison.
- Sánchez Prado, Ignacio. 2009. "El mestizaje en el corazón de la utopía: *La raza cósmica* entre Aztlán y América Latina", *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* (33: 2): 381-404.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2017. "*La casa de dolor ajeno* de Julián Herbert. No-ficción, memoria e historicidad en el México contemporáneo", *MLN* (2: 2): 426-440.
- Sarup, Madan. 1993. *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*. Georgia: University of Georgia Press.
- Shakespeare, William. 1996. "Sonnet LIX." In G. Blakemore Evans and Anthony Hecht, eds. *The Sonnets*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- The Holy Bible*. 2011. New International Version. *Biblica*.
- Vasconcelos, José. 1997. *La raza cósmica*. Maryland: John Hopkins University Press.
- Williams, Gareth. 2002. *The Other Side of the Popular*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.