

*There I crossed over to Chalkis for the prizes
in honor of wise Amphidamas, the many prizes proclaimed in advance
By his magnanimous sons. And I claim that there
I was the victor in a song contest and won an eared tripod,
Which I dedicated to the Helikonian Muses,
where they first taught me mastery of flowing song.*

Hesiod, *Works and Days*, c. 700 BC
translated by Apostolos N. Athanassakis

Poetry Contests and Competitions

by Steve Zeitlin and Amanda Dargan

“The idea for the poetry slam,” writes Miguel Algarín, “grows out of ancient traditions of competitive and/or linked rhymes between orators — from the Greek mythological tale of Apollo and Marsyas to the African griots, from the *Sanjukunin sen*, or imaginary poetry team competitions, of tenth-century Japanese court poet Fujiwara no Kinto to the African American ‘dozens.’ It is a tradition that still exists very actively on the island of Puerto Rico, where *El Trovador* improvises in the plaza, spontaneously pulls into the verse the life of the folks in the small town, the tragedies that have occurred in their families, the gossip that surrounds their private lives, and the celebratory passages that talk about births, deaths, weddings and baptisms. All this is compacted into ten-syllable lines with end rhymes.”

Poetry contests, formal and informal, are found in many of the world’s cultures. Among Eskimos, taunting songs are used to work out grudges; singer/poets ridicule each other with both traditional and specially composed songs. In the Arab world, poets duel in the sung oral poetry of the *zajal*, using *darej*, the colloquial language of the people. With nimble minds, a vast vocabulary, and considerable wit, each poet responds to the other in a traditional rhyming style that first appeared in twelfth-century Islamic Spain (Al-Andalus).

Japanese court poetry was heard at poetry matches called *utaawase*. These began informally but were later conducted according to formalized rules. The competitions even developed into a special form: a “poetry match with oneself” (*jikaawase*) in which an individual poet took two different roles and played a kind of poetic chess with himself. He then sent the results to a distinguished judge for comment.

In Tanzania, two singers sometimes agreed to compete on a certain day. The competition was decided according to which of the singers drew the greatest number of spectators. Sometimes the local sultan arranged the competition and served as umpire. Both poets tried to discover their opponent’s songs beforehand so they could prepare sarcastic and insulting responses. Throughout Africa and the African diaspora, the “man of words” is regarded with special esteem.

In many cultures of the world, adolescent boys have traditions of ritual insults, often involving rhyme and, in some cases, linking rhymes, in which the replies must rhyme with the insults. These traditions have been documented in Turkey and Mexico, as well as in Africa. In the United States, the African forms evolved into the “dozens.” Among young teenage boys, insults (“raps”) were followed by counter-insults (“caps”). These adolescent rhymes are frequently obscene, with frequent references to mothers, sisters, and sexual prowess (“Ring-a-ling-a, ting, ting, tong, /Your mother’s related to old King Kong”).

This year, the *People’s Poetry Gathering* explores dueling poets and competitive poetry traditions. Featured are the widespread Hispanic *décima* tradition; the World Heavyweight Poetry Bout from Taos, New Mexico; the Chicago-born poetry slam; and the emergent New York City freestyle rapping tradition, Braggin’ Rites. Taken from the title of a rap CD by J-Live, Braggin’ Rites is aptly named, for it suggests the playful quality of many of these competitions. Although prizes are often involved in formal versions of the contests, word duels are most essentially a way of resolving conflicts through language, where what is at stake are — braggin’ rights.

Whereas our western literary tradition, particularly the contemporary canon, has emphasized subtlety and understatement, poetry competitions remind us of another style of poetry, the art of overstatement and exaggeration. Mikhail Bakhtin describes Rabelais in terms of the Renaissance marketplace. “Superlative,” he writes, “is the prevailing tone... an ironic and maliciously exaggerated style.” Folklorist Benjamin Botkin describes the folk tradition of expansive utterance “from the tall talk of the backwoods booster to the sky-painting oratory of the demagogic politician and patriot.” We hear this speechifying in the art of the carnival pitchman, in the advertising jingle, in the “in your face” poetry of the slammer, and in the rhymes of the streetcorner rapper. (“I’m the... milkshaker, the record breaker, the population maker.” H. Rap Brown, “Rap’s Poem”) From the heartfelt yearnings of the decimistas to the streetcorner boasts of the rappers, complex aesthetic systems are at work — and at play.

La Décima

Elena Martínez and Roberta Singer

En la clínica de la décima In the clinic of the *décima*
Yo soy el médico superior I am the best doctor

(Lines from an improvised *décima* in Colombia)

Throughout Latin America, the Caribbean and Latino communities in the United States, songs are composed or improvised in a poetic form known as *décima* that may be as much as nine centuries old. The lyrics of these verses can be devotional (*a lo divino*) or secular (*a lo humano*). The former are usually reserved for Christmas and Easter in rural areas. *A lo humano* lyrics are more widespread. They may speak of the beauty of the land and matters of the heart; they idealize womanhood and are nostalgic for days of old; they address issues of profound concern such as nationalism and philosophize on life's existential questions; and they sing about the importance of *décima*. The following *décima*, by Edwin Colón Zayas y su Taller Campesino (¡Bien Jíbaro!, 1994, excerpted and transcribed) is an example of self-conscious nationalism that can be found in many *décimas* throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

Soy producto de la alianza	I am the product of the alliance
del Caribe y el Taíno	of the Carib and the Taíno
del Africano que vino	of the African that came
y se unió a la mezcla	and joined the mixture,
del español que se lanza	of the Spaniard who landed
y se une al nativo isleño	and joined with the native islander
produciendo un borinqueño	producing a <i>borinqueño</i>
piel quemada por el sol.	skin burned by the sun.
Soy indio, negro, español	I am Indian, African, Spanish
yo soy un puertorriqueño	I am Puerto Rican

The contemporary performance of *décima* takes a variety of forms in different parts of the Americas, but its poetic form is based on the octosyllabic, ten-line structure used by Mozarabe (Ibero-Muslim) poets of southern Spain during the 11th and 12th centuries. Scholars credit *décima's* invention to the Spanish court poet, Vicente Espinel (1550-1624), who used it in his collection of poems *Diversas Rimas* (1591). These poems were cast in what became *décima's* basic rhyme structure: *abbacddc*, or what is commonly known as *la décima espinela*.

In 17th century Spain the literary usage of *décima* began to decline, but in the Americas it took root and continues to flourish as both a literary genre (*décima culta*) and a folk poetry (*décima popular*). In fact, from the middle of the 18th through the 19th century, *décima* was the dominant sung ballad tradition in Latin America. *Décima popular* evolved into a uniquely New World phenomenon with innovative new performance styles and contexts. *Décima* as it flourishes in oral tradition today may be recited or sung; sung with simple or elaborate instrumental accompaniment or *a capella*; pre-composed or improvised. It is performed in concerts, at parties and community celebrations and in competitions. *Décimas* are most often sung by one *decimero* or *trovador*, but often two *decimeros* may join together, trading improvised verses in *controversia*, trying to out-do one another in creativity and poetic imagery, sometimes putting down the other by casting aspersions on his character, lifestyle or proficiency as a *decimero*. Often in a *controversia* the improvisations are based on a theme provided by the audience.

A range of styles of *décima* improvisations have developed over the centuries. Two of the most common are the *glosa* and the *pié forzado*. *Glosa* is a precomposed introductory four-line stanza followed by four improvised *décima* verses. Each verse ends with one line from the *glosa* and is an elaboration of the *glosa's* theme. It is believed the four-line *glosa* is of Arabic origin and was invented in the ninth century.

In concerts, community events and sung *décima* contests (*concursos de trovadores*), the singer is provided with a pre-written eight-syllable line, a *pié forzado*, upon which he or she must improvise *décima* verses, using the *pié forzado* as the last line. The theme of the *pié forzado* is developed by the singer in the first nine lines of each *décima* verse.

Pueblo mío, yo te aconsejo
 que al marchar para dejarte
 no abandones este arte
 que a tu cuidado yo dejo
 que alegre al chico, al viejo
 y al que me estuvo escuchando.
 más debes de ir fomentando
 y no dejar sucumbir
 lo que recoge el sentir
 de un jíbaro improvisando.

My people, I advise you
 once I have left you
 don't abandon this art
 that I leave in your trust
 that gave joy to the young and old
 and all those that heard me.
 But you must go on encouraging
 and not lose the essence
 and that which conveys the meaning
 Of a *jíbaro* improvising a *décima*.

(Cuerdas de Borinquen in [Puerto Rico en Washington](#),
 Smithsonian Folkways 40460, 1997)

Improvised *décima* texts typically contain stock phrases and vocables which serve as “stalling” devices, allowing the singer time to invent new material (eg., *Muy buenos tardes, señores* / Good day gentlemen; *Yo me dedico a cantar* / I dedicate this song; *Como humilde trovador* / as a humble singer). The vocables *lei lo lai* are so common in the *mapayé* form of *décima* in Puerto Rico that the form itself is referred to as “Lei lo lai.” It is believed these vocables may be of Arabic origin by way of Andalusia.

An important and especially innovative aspect of the *décima* tradition in the Americas is the competition — both formal and informal — between two or more *decimeros*. In addition to the *controversia* described above, *concursos de trovadores* have become important *décima* competition contexts. In most countries where *concursos* have become traditional events they are usually sponsored by a governmental arts agency or a corporation (such as the Instituto de Cultura and Bacardí Rum in Puerto Rico). In a typical *concurso* a panel of judges evaluates and scores the contestants on the basis of voice, rhyme, rhythm, meter and stage presence and winners are awarded prize money.

Décima and its community contexts continue to flourish today throughout the Americas, maintaining its status as a central popular folk expression even in the face of the commercial mass culture sweeping in from the north. In the above sample from Puerto Rico a *trovador* admonishes his fellow *jíbaros* (*campesinos*, mountain folk) to maintain this tradition, so vital to their lifestyle.

Further Reading and Listening

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Freestylin' — Braggin' Rites

Although rap music is mass-marketed by major record labels, rap is also a folk tradition in African-American inner-city communities. With roots in the traditions of the griot in West Africa and the verbal street duels (“playing the dozens”) of earlier generations, rap originated in New York in the early 1970s, along with the related traditions of break-dancing and graffiti.

Informal competitions between rappers still occur on street corners in cities throughout the United States. Freestyle rappers are presented by hip-hop aficionados in venues such as the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. In New York, three Brooklyn friends — Isaac Collazo, Fritz Jeanitton, and Edwin Avellaneda (“Yeshua dapo Ed”) — were interested in the “underground” forms of hip-hop. “Anyone who listens to rap music,” says Isaac Collazo, “rhymes.” The three have developed Braggin' Rites into a freestyle rap competition with its own rules.

In regular competitions at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe on New York's Lower East Side, a DJ with two turntables selects a particular beat for each round. There are thirty-two contestants in eight groups of four each. Each has a minute and a half to improvise raps to the beat. As in the dozens and other forms of African-American street poetry, insults and boasting are intertwined. The winner of each group is selected when the MC calls out each name after the round and asks for applause — the loudest applause signals the winner. These eight winners then compete in two groups of four in the semifinal round. The two finalists then square off in two rounds of one-minute raps for the finals.

Further Reading

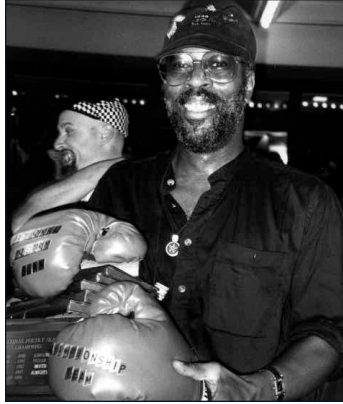
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Keith Roach with the National Slam trophy which was won by the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in 1998.

Slam

On July 20, 1986, construction worker and poet Marc Smith needed to come up with another act at the Get Me High bar in Chicago. With a group of poets, he experimented with a competitive reading he called the slam. It was an instant success, and soon he moved the slam troupe over to the Green Mill Café, where slams are still held on Sunday nights.

The slam is a poetry format in which poems are rated by randomly selected audience members on a scale from 1 to 10. After a poem is read, each of the newly appointed judges holds up a card with a number on it. The event is regarded by its practitioners, and framed by skilled MCs, as a “mock Olympic competition,” conducted always as a way of inspiring poets and generating interest in poetry (in his poem manifesto “Slam disclaimer,” Bob Holman says that “The best poet always loses”). In *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*, Miguel Algarín calls the slam a form of “literate humor, with no discerning of ‘high’ or ‘low’, all in the service of bringing a new audience to poetry via a form of entertainment meant to tune up fresh ears to a use of language as art....”

Each year, four-person teams from various cities come to the National Slam Tournament. Last year more than forty cities competed in Austin, Texas, and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe from New York took home the trophy. This August the Nationals will return to Chicago for the tenth anniversary National Slam.

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Heavyweight Poetry Bout

The Taos World Heavyweight Poetry Bout was inspired by an event at the Oxford Pub in Chicago in 1981. A blues singer, Jim Desmond, became angered when poet Jerome Sala read a poem that parodied John Lennon, who had just died. The two got into a fistfight but eventually agreed to settle the dispute with a competitive reading.

Out in New Mexico, Annie MacNaughton and Peter Rabbit, two poets with roots in the communes of the 1960s, heard about the bout and thought it would be a good way to help drum up a poetry scene in Taos. They started the Taos Poetry Circus and the Heavyweight Poetry Bout, whose rules are adapted from the official rules of the Illinois Boxing Commission. Each fight has ten rounds; in each round, each of the two poets reads a poem that lasts no longer than five minutes; in the tenth round, poets improvise a poem on a theme drawn out of a hat. In the 1988 Heavyweight Championship, contender Sherman Alexie, an American Indian writer from Spokane, Washington, delivered these striking lines, earning the victory over two-time defending champ and home-state favorite Jimmy Santiago Baca:

I was born with a river in my brain
And when the doctors cut open my forehead
They found 1,000 salmon skeletons.