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The People's Poetry Gathering

Oral Poetry Traditions from Around the World

by Steve Zeitlin & Amanda Dargan

Note: The writing exercises in this article are by T&W poet and playwright Dave Johnson.—Editor

POETRY ON THE PAGE is a relatively new idea. Only with the invention of the printing press, and in places with high rates of literacy, have poems been shared primarily in print. Even in this country, until recently the poems of Whitman, Shakespeare, and others were most often read aloud. Reciting poems from memory was a part of family, school, and community traditions, as commonplace as singing songs. This now largely lost recitation tradition thrived in settings as varied as traveling Chautauquas, English music halls, family parlors, and classrooms.

Throughout the world, there are many traditional forms of poetry that are composed to be performed aloud, and in many cases improvised in front of an audience. These traditions are an untapped resource for teachers of writing and literature. Not only do these traditions provide a window into the cultures that nourished them, they also provide suggestions and inspiration for encouraging

students to perform poetry, both their own and from literature. A number of these performance traditions are playful, and offer exciting possibilities for engaging students.

Oral poetry is important for classroom teachers because it creates a crucial link between literature and the spoken language. Oral forms of poetry can help students to see connections between their own lives and the poetry they read in school—as well as between literature and social studies.

Oral poetry also offers rich possibilities for exploring the relationship between poetry and culture. Many oral poetry traditions, such as the Latin American *décima*, the West African *jali*, and American rap, are rooted in the cultures that gave birth to them. They are often performed in community settings and express religious beliefs, societal values, cultural identity, and an indigenous view of history.

National Poetry Month Issue

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Here are some oral poetry forms you can explore with your students.

Literatura de Cordel (Stories on a String)

In marketplaces throughout northeast Brazil, local poets publish their verses in pamphlet form. The pamphlets, called *folhetos*, are hung on clotheslines strung across the poets' stalls. The poets recite their poems to passing shoppers, who enjoy hearing exploits of their heroes and local news events recited in verse. Called *literatura de cordel* (stories on a string), these tales told in verse are, according to anthropologist Candace Slater, "the world's richest and most varied heirs to a centuries-old ballad and chapbook tradition once embracing most of Europe." For more than a century, *folhetos* have been the favorite reading material of the general public in northeast Brazil.

A *folheto* is a little book, usually measuring four by six and one-half inches and numbering eight, sixteen, thirty-two, or sixty-four pages. Printed on newsprint and illustrated with a woodcut print cover, *folhetos* are sold with uncut pages. The author's or publisher's name (or both) usually appears above the title. Often the back cover has a photograph of the poet.

The *literatura de cordel* tradition incorporates many of the heritages of Brazilian culture. Among the most important are the Portuguese chapbook tradition, the oral Iberian balladry tradition, and the Brazilian improvised verse dialogues or contests called *desafios* or *pelejas*, which evolved from the *tenzone*, a poetic form practiced by medieval troubadours. Other influences are biblical stories, the *exemplum* (a tale that illustrates a moral point), and Brazilian folktales (*trancosos*). Some scholars have suggested that the *cordel* also may have been influenced by the African narrative tradition called *akpaló*, brought by enslaved Africans to northeast Brazil.

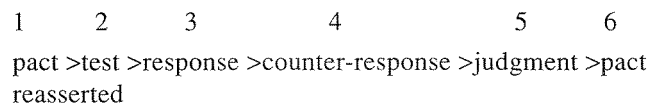
Cordel poems are usually written in stanzas of six or seven lines that follow an *ababab* rhyming pattern. In her book *Stories on a String: The Brazilian Literatura de Cordel*, anthropologist Candace Slater describes other salient features of *cordel*: a six-step structure, with a decided back-and-forth motion that reflects the *repentista** heritage; a beginning and conclusion in the first person, with a third-person narrative between; individual authorship emphasized by devices such as a final identifying acrostic; the reliance on "eyewitness" or other corroborating sources; the use of colloquial language and local dialect, archaisms, and the mixture of elevated and everyday language, often in the same stanza; Christian overtones; and a focus on concerns of the poor (hunger, sickness, lack of money, and lack of education).

* *Repentistas*: traveling poets who improvised using related forms.



Examples of Brazilian folhetos

In her study of the *cordel*, Slater also discusses the six-step pattern found in most *cordel* verse, particularly that of the older poets. The *cordel* begins by depicting 1) a state of harmony, usually involving a pact between social unequals. 2) This harmony is threatened when one party (either a community or an individual) faces a test that represents a trial not only of that party's character, but of the legitimacy of the pact itself. 3) That party's response, right or wrong, triggers a 4) counter-response by the other party, which is typically followed by a series of back-and-forth actions reaching a climax in a 5) judgment, when right is rewarded and wrong punished. The story closes with 6) a reaffirmation of the initial pact. Slater depicts this pattern in the following way:



Cordel poems are too long to include a complete example here. The excerpts below illustrate many of their traditional features: the first-person opening, in which the poet asks for God's blessing and then describes his own life; the body of the poem, in third-person dialogue, which describes a conflict between two protagonists that is resolved; and the closing remarks of the poet, again in first person, in which he vouches for the authenticity of his story by citing witnesses and published accounts, and

by stressing his own honesty. The poem often closes with a final invocation to God.

The poet who wrote the *cordel* below, Jose de Souza Campos, took his story from an old parable that dates back to a first-century Buddhist scripture. Like many *cordel* poets, de Souza Campos both writes stories from his own imagination and translates traditional stories into *cordel*-style verse. (The complete text of this poem can be found in the Slater book.)

O Rei a Pomba e O Gaviao
(The King, the Dove, and the Sparrow hawk)
(Excerpt)

I will make a request to God
(I don't know if it is a sin)
that He grant me
an easier existence
because I am beginning to weary
of the constant struggle.

*(A Deus farei um pedido
Nao sei se sera pecado
Para Ele conceder-me
Um viver mais liberado
Sinto a luta e o desgaste
Ja me deixando cansado.)*

[...]

I have a desire to one day
give poverty a swift kick,
take on new courage,
embrace elegance
and assure myself wealth.

I heard a voice within me say
"Clear your mind
so that you can imagine
and describe the blessed fate
of the great King Vrixadarba
and a heavenly bird."

The good Virxadarba
lived in Benares,
a foreign country.
He was the kind of person
who dedicated his life
to helping his people.

[...]

The king was seated one day
in his lovely garden
listening to the birds caroling
and enjoying the heavenly fragrance
when he sensed that
he had a visitor.

He heard the low murmur
of a small wing
fanning the air.
A sublime dove
whose beauty astounded him
alighted in the grove.

The lovely bird
made a terrified gesture
and at that moment a cruel sparrow hawk
also alighted near the king.
Asking the sovereign's protection,
the little dove said,

The People's Poetry Gathering

City Lore and Poets House, in collaboration with the Western Folklife Center, invite you to celebrate this nation's and the world's indigenous, immigrant, and emergent oral poetry traditions at the first annual People's Poetry Gathering in New York City on April 9–11, 1999. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, Robert Bly, and Sherman Alexie join some of the best-known poets from around the nation and the world to explore some of the many forms and experiences of poetry. Featured performers will include:

- Cowboy poets and singers
- *Jalilu* ("griots"), a tradition from West Africa
- Master *décimistas* from Mexico, Colombia, and Puerto Rico
- U. Utah Philips and the hobo poets
- Traditional blues singers and blues-inspired poets
- A master poet of the Brazilian *literatura de cordel* tradition
- Masters of Japanese *renga*

For more information, call 800-333-5982 or visit www.peoplespoetry.org on the Internet.

“Look out for the innocent,
And grant me your protection,
by freeing me from the grievous
clutches
of this cruel sparrow hawk
who pursues me
without compassion.”

[...]

The great king said to her
with a little smile,
“Do not be afraid, divine bird,
because I will help you.
If possible, I will give my own life
for yours.

[...]

“Your eyes show
that you were sent from Heaven
to this abyss called Earth
to speak with this undeserving creature
who regards you with naked eye,
unaided by veil or curtain.”

[...]

The sparrow hawk, who was
observing the whole scene,
then approached the king
and started talking to him.
“I am within my rights,” he said.
“I have been pursuing this dove a long time.

“And she belongs to me.
It took effort to win her,
And now she is my prisoner.
Despite her beauty,
the mark of my claws
is on her flesh.

[...]

“If this dove escapes,
this sparrow hawk will not eat.
How will you enhance
your reputation
by giving life to a slave
and starving its owner?

“Since the law is on my side,
I ought to win.
The heavens do not belong to you;
this city is hers and mine.
If I struggled to find her,
Then this dove is Nature’s gift.

“So, dear monarch,
I have explained my position.
A king ought to take sides

in a fight between Christians
but has no right to intervene
in a struggle between hawk and dove.”

“So then,” the king replied,
“Do you alone have the right to speak?
Here you are in my country,
my kingdom, my orchard.
How can there be any exchange
if one speaks and the other is silent?”

The sparrow hawk responded,
“I will leave your kingdom now
if you order
the dove to leave, too.
If she is lawfully mine within your borders,
how much more so outside them?”

The king answered him,
“Here no one suffers,
I protect not only the dove but you.
Tell me what you want to eat
and put an end
to your hunger.”

[...]

“My only food is
these beautiful little doves,
and so I scour the world
for them.
The only other thing I eat
is human flesh.

I will still make you a proposition:
if you want to, give me
an equal portion of your own flesh,
and you can
have the dove.”

The king was satisfied
with this proposal.
He immediately arranged
for a knife and scale
and quickly set the dove
on one side of the balance.

And without delay, the king
set about cutting
his own flesh, setting it upon
his side of the scales,
but the more he set there,
the more the dove appeared to weigh.

He cut flesh from his thighs
just like a butcher
shaking the scales
in complete despair
when he had a sudden vision
of hammer, cross, and wood.

He concentrated upon Jesus Christ
and asked forgiveness,
feeling himself ready and willing
to die for the dove
as the scale kissed the ground
with the weight of his body.

[...]

Suddenly a fragrant mist
enveloped the scale
where the good king
had cut his own flesh.
The wind carried the sound
of a divine harp to those below.

[...]

And while the people were overcome
by that heavenly sound,
the fragrant mist
was descending over the king,
restoring the flesh
he had cut.

Five minutes later,
the king was just as he had always
been.

His body revealed
no defect whatsoever
but God stands by them.

[...]

From that day on,
the good king
kept increasing vigil
over his people,
saw to his animals, revered innocence
and watched over the fields.

His subjects
followed his example.
The king's drama was recounted
throughout the world,
and authors wrote books about the king,
the dove, and the sparrow hawk.

Still today in Benares
where this event occurred,
there is an eyewitness
who wrote to me about it.
Thanks to his ample studies,
he is the author of distinguished books.

Whoever reads this story
should reflect well upon it;
then tell me if there is a man today
who would cut his own flesh
for a bird who appeared
from the heavens.

[...]

Jehovah, holy name,
seed of the greatest good,
just and gracious ruler
and unifier,
watch over my life!
I love you and no one else.

—*Jose de Souza Campos*
(Translated by Candace Slater)

Writing Exercise

Students can write poems, individually or collectively, modeled on the *cordel* above. They can begin with an invocation in the first person, and follow it with a third-person narrative that involves a back-and-forth conversation between two or three characters. They can also retell newspaper articles and news stories, local events, or traditional tales. The poem should end with the poet returning to the first person to offer evidence of the authenticity of the tale, and a final invocation.

For the “string” part: make *folhetos* by photocopying the poems and cover art onto single sheets, then fold the sheets and display them on strings at special events. To get the layout right, take a blank sheet, fold it, mark the page numbers in the correct sequence and orientation, then unfold it and use it as a master guide for future printed *folhetos*.

Further Reading

Slater, Candace. *Stories on a String: The Brazilian Literatura de Cordel*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

Jali Praise Poems

Before colonialism, Africa was ruled by kings. Each kingdom had a family of poets and singers who provided music and poetry for royal occasions, including coronations, weddings, and funerals. The French colonialists called these singers and poets “griots,” possibly naming them after *grigri*, the magical ornaments worn by African healers, or from the verb *crier*, to scream or shout. Today these singers and poets are once again called by their African designations: *jali* (poet-musicians) and *finah* (poet-historians).

In ancient Mandeng society, the *jalilu** and *finah* enjoyed great prestige, wealth, and status. Known as “people of the word,” a designation they inherited from their families, they were official chroniclers, mediators, healers, entertainers, ambassadors, administrators, and spokesmen

* Plural of *jali*.



Photo: Alex Veiger

Jali poet Kewulay Kamara

for the *mansa*, or king. Today, the *jali* (a term which encompasses both *jali* and *finah* poets) still play an important role in African society, although the *jali*—who sings and accompanies his poems with music, and often performs as an entertainer—is better known in contemporary African society.

Finah still perform praise poems and serve as masters of ceremony for important occasions. The *finah* also study indigenous traditional knowledge and the Quran and Hadith, which are the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed and interpretations of the religious laws. Their longest poems are epics that tell the history of the people, and may take days to recite. For example, the well-known epic of Son-Jara, the thirteenth-century hunter-warrior who founded the empire of Mali, is more than 3,000 lines long.

Not all *jali* praise songs, of course, are as long as the *Son-Jara*. Most begin by associating the protagonist with his or her parents, ancestors, and the places he or she comes from. Kewulay Kamara, a *finah* from Sierra Leone now living in New York City, told us, “Recently, I wrote a praise poem for my brother. We are from Danka Wali, situated at the foothills of the Loma Mountains, the watershed of the great river Niger. This is a special place as far as we’re concerned. So when I wrote the poem, I said, ‘This man is not only the son of Kamara and Mara, but he comes from the village of Danka Wali at the foothills of the great Loma Mountains, considered to be full of spirits.’ Just to say that a person comes from that place means something to us—to come from a place where the Niger River begins—I mean this is a very special place, and so this is a very special man.

“All of a sudden you are part of something much, much greater, the land that you come from, the people that you come from. A child to be praised may be just a little boy—but pointing out who his father is and who his

grandfather is in a praise poem elevates that person. It’s not saying that a person has made a lot of money or that he is the president of the United States, but that he is a father or a mother or a grandfather or a grandmother—and that’s important enough. That elevates a person.”

Here is Kewulay Kamara’s poem:

*For Yelka Lansani Finah Kamara
Son of Yelka Mara
And Karta Assan Finah Kamara*

Living in the village of Dankawali
At the foothills of the Loma Mountains
The watershed of the great Niger River

Man of knowledge,
of humility and generosity
A man of faith is never poor
A man of fecundity
A family man and farmer

So far yet so present
Till I set eyes on you I shall not rest

The Dunya is deceptive
Dunya is not the home of permanence
In this sojourn,
Let no one offend a fellow traveler
Pomp and position, size and circumstance
Are not the essence of humanity.
To each his calling; to each his destiny
According to the creator of the heavens and the earth

Elder brother of Kewulay Fina
Younger brother of Assatan Lansani
Do not be lost in thought
For thought does not fathom the bottom of creation

I call you Yin the tree of fecundity of farm and family

Stand Yin
As steady as the rock upon which Dankawali stands

—Kewulay Kamara

Writing Exercise

Using a form inspired by the example above or by examples in *Oral Epics from Africa* (see reference), write a praise poem about someone you either know personally or simply admire from a distance. Begin by talking about that person’s origins.

In writing the poem, try to use the rhythm and pacing of the person who inspired you to write a praise song for him or her. If you are praising the moves of a chess champion, the pace and rhythm will be very different from those of a poem about Michael Jordan. Use language particular to that person, and to his or her vocation. Be specific: let us see that person and hear that person. Use all the senses. Make us want to meet this person immediately!

Further Reading

- Johnson, John William, Thomas A. Hale, and Stephen Belcher, eds. *Oral Epics from Africa*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1997. (Contains excerpts from twenty-five African oral epics.)
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- Niane, D. T. *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. Translated by G. D. Pickett. Harlow, Essex, England: Longman, 1994.
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The Blues

The blues has its beginnings in African American folk traditions and music. From its origins in the plantation culture of the rural South, the blues continued to develop in the ghettos of cities in the North and the Midwest—such as Chicago, Kansas City, and St. Louis—to which many African Americans from the South migrated after the 1890s.

The classic blues stanza consists of three lines of verse. The first line presents a statement that is repeated in the second line, with greater or lesser degrees of variation. The third line offers a rhymed response, often resolving the issue raised in the first two lines. The first blues song is often attributed to W. C. Handy, who wrote "St. Louis Blues" in 1900, but the blues grew out of older forms such as field hollers and call-and-response religious music. Some of the earliest blues songs were recorded from sharecroppers following the Civil War and in the early 1900s. In 1936, Kokomo Arnold sang a blues song about the boll weevil, an insect barely a quarter of an inch long that devastated the cotton crop in the southern U.S. earlier in the century:

Mister Weevil, Mister Weevil, you left us in an awful fix,
Mister Weevil, Mister Weevil, you left us in an awful fix,
Done et up all our home, left us nothin' but the sticks.

This verse, recorded by Big Bill Broonzy, recalls the rural roots of the blues:

Farming is all right, little girl, if you knows just what to do
Farming is all right, little girl, if you knows just what to do
'Cause it killed my old grandpap, oh Lord, I declare I'm
going to make it kill me too.

As more and more African Americans moved north, from rural areas to cities in what has been called "The Great Migration," blues lyrics began to reflect the urban

experience, giving rise to what became known as "urban blues." This blues song by Little Bill Gaither and Big Bill Broonzy, recorded in Chicago in 1941, is an example:

I used to live in New Orleans, it's been a good many years
ago
I used to live in New Orleans, it's been a good many years
ago
But since I been up North I been sleepin' on the barroom
floor.

I been on relief in Chicago and soup lines in Kokomo,
I been on relief in Chicago and soup lines in Kokomo,
But I'm going right back down South where I won't be
driven from door to door.

The blues have become a synonym for a certain kind of sad and melancholy feelings—although the range of blues music is much greater than that. We can't reexperience what the great bluesmen like Lightning Hopkins, Big Bill Broonzy, and Blind Lemon Jefferson lived through in the Great Migration. Listening to their music may be the closest we can come to understanding that experience. But those feelings of sadness and melancholy characteristic of so many blues lyrics are something we all understand, and know intimately.

What are the blues? As Louis Armstrong said about jazz, cousin to the blues, "Man, if you gotta ask, you'll never know."

Writing Exercise

The blues form, with its two repeated lines followed by a third rhyming line, is easy for students to grasp. Play some blues recordings (see the suggestions below) and then encourage students to improvise their own lyrics. Remind them that blues songs often have a melancholy feeling, created by themes of missing someone or of being rejected by someone you love, or of feeling down-trodden by work—or lack of work—or by society. When you play a blues song, ask students to think about what the music contributes to the melancholy feeling. Examine some blues lyrics and discuss how blues musicians use music, certain expressions (*lowdown*), and metaphors and similes ("She's got ways like an angel, an' she's sweet like heaven above"). One blues strategy is to describe a bad situation and then make it even worse before posing some kind of solution.

Then have students write their own blues. One good approach is to tell students to think of a task they have repeated so many times that they have become weary and tired. One student wrote:

I have read so much homework my eyes are about to pop
I have read so much homework my eyes are about to pop
I've sat in this chair so long, I got to get up and go shop.

After students have written at least four stanzas, have them come up with final stanzas that could possibly change the states or conditions described in their poems.

Further Reading and Listening

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Cowboy Poetry

The occupation of cowboy has developed into a distinctive culture, with its own music, poetry, language, and crafts. Back in 1910, John Lomax left Harvard University to travel out west to collect cowboy songs and poems. The result was his book *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, which helped to popularize cowboy music.

The real cowboys who herded cattle out west continued to have their own traditions, and reciting poetry was among them. In 1985, a group of Western folklorists began collecting and recording that poetry. They started the Cowboy Poetry Gathering, which has proven to be one of the most popular events in the American West, bringing together many thousands of people and hundreds of cowboy poets each year in Elko, Nevada.

The poems of cowboys are filled with the images, settings, skills, customs, and jargon of cowboy life. Today, cowboy poetry has a wide audience, but the

traditional setting for sharing it was the bunkhouse or the campfire. Many cowboy poems proudly describe the hard work and independence of the cowboy life. Some poke fun at cowboys. Wallace McRae's "Hat Etiquette" is an example:

Hat Etiquette

There are rules of decorum and conduct
to which genuine cowboys attest.
Call them mores, traditions or manners,
they're part of the code of the West.
But cowpokes have got this dilemma,
that confuses these sage diplomats.
It involves the whens and when-not-tos,
concerning the wearing of hats.
The old rule concerning head covers says
"Hat-up when you work, or you ride.
Tip 'em to women. But take John B.* off
when in bed, or when you're inside."
But whaddya do in a gin mill,
bean shops or dances in town?
Where Resistol** rustlers'll filch it
or some lowlife'll puke in its crown.
'N there ain't no such thing as a hat rack
anyplace that I been of late,
So we all compromise with a tip back,
baring pallid foreheads and bald pate.
What we needs is a new resolution
to settle this conflict we got.
So I come up with this here solution,
a result of consider'ble thought:
"I move that we do like good Hebrews,
wear hats from our birth 'til we die.
And never remove them sombreros.
All those in favor say, 'Aye.'"

—Wallace McRae

Another cowboy poet, Paul Zarzyski, grew up in Montana, where he rode bareback broncs in rodeos for more than a decade. Now Paul travels to recite his poems, which describe life in the rodeo. As he describes it, "Whereas I once lived for the jump-'n'-kick, rock-'n'-rowel buckin' horse; I live now for the jump-'n'-kick, rock-'n'-rowel buckin' verse—the ring and ricochet of lingo off the stirrup bone of the middle ear. But I've never made a living at either." A proponent of innovative verse forms, Paul has taken cowboy poetry in new directions.

All This Way for the Short Ride

(in memory of Joe Lear)

After grand entry cavalcade of flags,
Star-Spangled Banner, stagecoach figure 8s
in a jangle of singletrees, after trick riders
sequined in tights, clowns in loud getups,

* John B.: cowboy slang for hat.

** Resistol: a brand of hat.

queens sashed pink or chartreuse
in silk—after the fanfare—the domed
rodeo arena goes lights-out
black: stark silent
prayer for a cowboy crushed by a ton
of crossbred Brahma

What went wrong—
too much heart behind a high kick,
both horns hooking earth, the bull vaulting
a half-somersault to its back—
each witness recounts with the same
gruesome note: the wife
stunned in a bleacher seat
and pregnant with their fourth. In this dark
behind the chutes, I strain to picture,
through the melee of win with loss,
details of a classic ride—body curled
fetal to the riggin', knees up,
every spur stroke in perfect sync,
chin tucked snug. In this dark,
I rub the thick neck of my bronc, his pulse
rampant in this sudden night
and lull. I know the instant
that bull's flanks tipped beyond
return, how the child inside
fought with his mother for air
and hope, his heart with hers
pumping in pandemonium—in shock,
how she maundered in the arena
to gather her husband's bullrope and hat, bells
clanking to the murmur of crowd
and siren's mewl.

The child learned early
through pain the amnion could not protect him from,
through capillaries of the placenta, the sheer
peril of living with a passion
that shatters all at once
from infinitesimal fractures
in time. It's impossible, when dust
settling to the backs of large animals
makes a racket you can't think in,
impossible to conceive that pure fear,
whether measured in degrees of cold
or heat, can both freeze
and incinerate so much
in mere seconds. When I nod
and they throw this gate open to the same
gravity, the same 8 ticks
of the clock, number 244 and I
will blow for better or worse
from this chute — flesh and destiny up
for grabs, a bride's bouquet
pitched blind.

—Paul Zarzyski

Writing Exercises

1) Exercise based on “Hat Etiquette”: Start by choosing an object, an item you have that you wear or use every day. Choose something special to you—ideally, something that has its own “etiquette”—and describe that object in detail, using everyday language. Tell how its different uses have different meanings to you and to other people. Rhyme is optional.

2) Exercises based on “All This Way for the Short Ride”:

A) *The Event Poem*. Think of a dramatic event you have witnessed—a ball game, concert, ballet, or street-corner incident—and recount it using the language common to that event. The rhythm and form of the poem could be dictated by the event itself. You might go back and forth between the participants and an onlooker, as Zarzyski does when he zooms in on “the wife / stunned in a bleacher seat / and pregnant with their fourth.” Experiment with line breaks to speed up or slow down the pacing of the poem. Here is one student example:

Stomp

This step

show

Was an experience like no other:
Feet stomping, hands clashing
Together introducing rhythm to the dead air,
Hearts pumping, breathing fast and short,
Warm blood rushing through my narrow thin veins,
Sweat piercing through the pores of my skin,
Words floating through my mind telling me to do “this”
and “that,”

Images soaring past my eye, an eagle in a sky.

—Ashmah Hosford, *John Dewey H.S.*

B) *The Work Poem*. Riding rodeo is an occupation, and Zarzyski's poem can be read simply as a poem about work. He has picked a particularly dramatic moment in a dangerous occupation, but many occupations have their own dramatic and dangerous sides. Even a student doing homework could be interrupted by a dramatic event. Have students choose occupations to write about, and have them write about the dramatic (or dangerous) aspects of those occupations.

C) *The Danger Poem*. Have students write about a specific moment they experienced in a dangerous situation. The danger could be physical, moral, or emotional.

D) *The “Moment Before” Poem*. The moment before something happens is often filled with anticipation, and can be quite thrilling: the moment before you tell someone a painful truth, the moment before a race starts, the moment before you ask someone for a date for the first

time, the moment before you have to stand up and deliver a speech, etc. Have students compose poems about these “moments before.”

Further Reading and Listening

Back in the Saddle Again: American Cowboy Songs. New World Records. Tel. (212) 302-0460.

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Lomax, John A. *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads.* New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1910; Reprint Services Corp., 1993.

The Cowboy Poetry Gathering: Elko, Nevada. Rhino Records/World Beat. Available through Western Folklife Center. Tel. (775) 738-7508.

Poetry Contests and the Décima

Poetry contests are found in many cultures. During the Hellenistic and Roman periods in Greece, bards competed for prizes at festivals held by a cult of the Helikonian Muses. Among Eskimos, taunting songs are used to work off grudges. In the Arab world, poets duel in the sung oral poetry of the *zajal*, using colloquial language. With nimble minds, these contemporary poets respond to the other in rhyme in a style that first appeared in twelfth-century Islamic Spain. In Japan, court poetry originated in poetry contests. Eventually these developed into a special form of a poetry match with oneself, in which an individual poet took two different roles and played a kind of poetic chess with himself. He would then send the results to a distinguished judge for comment. In Tanzania, two poet-singers sometimes agree to compete on a certain day. The competitors try to find out their opponent’s songs beforehand, so they can prepare sarcastic and insulting responses.

In many cultures of the world, adolescent boys have traditions of ritual insults, often involving rhyme, and in some cases, linking rhymes (when the replies need to rhyme with the insults). These traditions have been documented in Turkey, Mexico, and Africa. In the United States, the African forms evolved into “the dozens.”

Along with poetry slams, freestyle rap contests, and the annual Taos World Heavyweight Poetry Bout, the *décima* is a type of poetry contest that is popular today. In Latin America, the Caribbean, and in some parts of the U.S., improvised lyrics in the *décima* form are used

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Photo: Dan Sheehy

Trío Jarocho Chalchihuecan, a group of décimistas from Mexico

by poets to “rank” one another in a friendly competition. In one informal contest in the Cuban countryside, an older poet declaims the beauty of the evening sky in the classic *décima* style. A younger *decimista* razzes him with,

How splendid and beautiful the evening sky
But I didn’t come out this evening
To be the little cane in the hand of a tottering grandfather.

The older *decimista* answers back,

As I stand here in this place
I am the sturdy crutch that taught you to walk.

Though the *decima* form has many variations, its structure is based on a ten-line scheme, with each line having eight syllables. This structure was used by Mozarabe (Ibero-Muslim) poets of southern Spain during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Most scholars give credit to its invention to the Spanish court poet, Vicente Espinel (1550–1624), who used it in his collection of poems, *Diversas rimas* (1591). These used what became the *decima*’s basic rhyme structure: *abbaaccddc*.

In the seventeenth century, the literary usage of the *decima* in Spain began to decline. But throughout Latin America, it continued to thrive as both a literary genre (*decima culta*) and as folk poetry (*decima popular*). *Decima* verses may be recited or sung, precomposed or improvised. Perhaps the most exciting and innovative

aspect of the evolution of the *décima* into a uniquely New World phenomenon was the development of the improvised, sung *décima*. This is performed either a cappella or with instrumental accompaniment, which may range from a single instrument to a complex ensemble.

Improvisation commonly consists of “glossing” (paraphrasing or further illuminating a text). The *décima* form involves a *pie forzado* (forced foot), an eight-syllable line from which the singer must improvise *décima* verses. The *pie forzado* then becomes the last line. *Décima* texts—especially when improvised—typically contain stock phrases and formulae (*Muy buenas tardes señores* /Good day, gentlemen; *Yo me dedico a cantar* /I dedicate this song; *como humilde trovador* /as a humble troubadour). These act as “stalling” devices, allowing the singer time to invent the new material.

Verbal duels are also an important aspect of the tradition. *Décimistas* ask the audience for a theme or a *pie forzado*, or agree on one themselves. Then two singers alternate verses, trying to verbally outdo the other. A *concurso de trovadores* is a traditional event in Puerto Rico in which singers compete for prize money. The tradition continues today in the U.S. in many Puerto Rican communities, especially around Christmas. In the excerpt below, improvised by Wilfredo Ortiz during a contest in Puerto Rico in 1984, the *pie forzado* is “*Que mucho gozo cantando* /Singing with great pleasure.”

Soy un jíbaro de altura /I am a jíbaro* with class
Alla en mi pueblo natal /Here in the village of my birth
Y en el campo décimal /In the field of *décima*
Conozco bien la cultura /I know the culture well
Con amor y con cordura /With love and wisdom
Ahora estoy improvisando /I am improvising now
Y Dios que me esta ayudando /And God is helping me
Sino se me va la rima /But the rhyme comes out of me
Trepado en esta tarima /Climbing on this stage
Que mucho gozo cantando /Singing with great pleasure

In traditional Puerto Rican *concursons*, a panel of judges evaluates and scores contestants by voice, rhythm, meter and rhyme, thematic development, diction, use of popular language, and stage presence. In other Latin American countries where *concursons* are held, the criteria may vary.

* *Jibaro*: country farmer

Writing Exercise

Try organizing your own poetry contest. It's probably best to come up with your own poetic rules, since the rigid rhyme scheme and syllable count of the *décima* can be daunting for students—even without the added challenge of improvisation. Choose a jury, with perhaps one person to judge each category (rhyme, theme, etc.). Make slips of paper with *pie forzado* lines or themes to be drawn out of a hat. Emphasize that it is against the rules to insult or offend one's rival in the contest—but at the same time encourage friendly competition.

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