

Defendiendo la (Agri)Cultura: Reterritorializing Culture in the Puerto Rican Décima

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Introduction

Hispanic balladry is one of the most prevalent oral traditions in the Americas; one of the strongest examples of this is the Puerto Rican *décima*. People who sing these ballads today identify with a well-known type in Puerto Rican history call the *jibaro*. The word *jibaro* first appeared in print in 1814 according to Laguerre and Melón (1968) and referred to a peasant eking a living off the land in the high country, or center of the island. This paper explores the projection of Puerto Rican cultural identity in *décima* singing. In particular I show how particular themes evoke an idyllic bucolic past at the same time that formal constraints of the genre are rigidified. I discuss how both these trends relate back to the notion of defending a cultural identity in the wake of colonization and deterritorialization and how through singing *décimas* about country living, Puerto Rican culture is symbolically reterritorialized.¹

For this research project 14 people were interviewed and recordings were made at nine different *décima*-singing events. This article focuses on 58 *décima* verses that were improvised for a contest outside of Comerío. The salient semantic clusters that emerged revolved around country life and singing *décimas*. All verses were transcribed and words related to these two themes were counted.

The Rise of the Puerto Rican *Décima*

The *décima* is a ten-line verse of eight syllable lines and a limited number of rhyme schemes which became popular in the literate culture of sixteenth century Spain, though several authors have suggested connections with the Andalusian *zejel*, *mushawashah* and *kharja*.² Bernal del Castillo informs us that Spanish colonizers arrived in America singing octosyllabic *coplas*, another predecessor of the *décima* (cited in Canino 1986:26). The first Puerto Rican *décima* that

¹ The data for this paper come largely from fieldwork done in the summer of 1990 in Puerto Rico. I recorded *décimas* in several different contexts, including an improvisation contest that took place outside of Comerío that I focus on here.

² See Menocal 1987, Jiménez Benitez 1982, and López-Baralt 1985.

we have evidence of today was written during the seventeenth century in honor of the governor, unjustly imprisoned by the colonial government (Jiménez de Baez 1964:69). Evidence for the popularity of the *décima* form in Puerto Rico grew throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries (Jiménez de Baez 1964:65-95).

The *décima* became the dominant oral tradition in Puerto Rico, enjoying long-standing popularity similar to the *corrido* in Mexico. In 1918 J. Alden Mason stated that while “the popular octosyllabic *copla* . . . holds undisputed sway” in the rest of Latin America, in Puerto Rico it is successfully challenged by the *décima* (Mason 1918:290). The same sentiment is expressed in more recent works. In the conclusion of Canino’s *El Cantar Folklorico de Puerto Rico*, published in 1986, he talks about the *décima* as if, with a voracious appetite, it is gobbling up all the other traditional song forms on the island. He laments, “Today’s *trovadores* almost never compose *coplas* or brief song forms, they prefer to improvise *décimas* and when they do create a *copla*, they do it to serve as a *glosa* for a *décima*.” Further on he states, “Although *romances* are totally disappearing they left the themes and topics they used to deal with to the narrative *décimas*.”³ This statement is followed in the last paragraph of the book with the analysis that the popular traditions of today do not create new poetry, they only repeat the ancient oral traditions of the Spaniards: “Very seldom are we able to find” writes Canino “clearly Puerto Rican creations—except for *décimas*.”

Décimas are found in numerous contexts. They are written to be read and published by both elite and folk poets, written to be sung by oneself or another, or orally composed while singing. Practically nobody makes a living from singing, so weekends are the time when most *décima* events take place. Contexts for singing *décimas* include radio and T.V. programs, restaurant-bars, certain market places, patron saint festivals, religious events, folklore festivals, life cycle celebrations, political meetings, events to advertise businesses, homages, and improvisation competitions.

While the formal structure of *décima* lyrics harks back to Europe and North Africa, there is no mistaking the sung *décima* as a Caribbean form. The *güiro*—a gourd instrument inherited from the original inhabitants of the island, the Taíno Indians—forms the percussive base of practically all *décima* songs and in more recent years bongo drums have been imported from the more Afro-Antillean musical traditions on the island.

Deterritorialization

Deterritorialization lies at the heart of Puerto Rican life, tied to the migration patterns of the islanders. The first soldiers and colonialists came to Puerto Rico in 1508 with Ponce de León and waves of European immigrants arrived from South America and peripheral areas of southern Europe, especially the Canary Islands, over the next 4 centuries. Export of Puerto Rican labor

³ Menéndez Pidal says that when the *romance* lost ground in Spain and took refuge among illiterate people, the continuing emigration of these people to America had to continue propagating the tradition there (Canino 1986:7). The cannibalization of other forms by the *décima* as described by Canino is paralleled by the *corrido* along the Texas Mexico border as described by Paredes (1988 [1958]:149).

began soon after the United States invaded in 1898 and today, when over a third of the population lives in the United States, most families have members abroad.⁴ This massive out migration affects the entire island: those who remain, those who left and those who left and returned. Several *trovadores* told me that they began to sing *décimas* after suffering for a time working in the cold North, or fighting in the jungles of Vietnam. Away from home, they missed their island.

Physical departure is not essential for a feeling of deterritorialization to set in. Colonization creates its own sense of deterritorialization. People born in a place can feel the loss of their land and old way of life in a somewhat similar fashion as do those who leave. Puerto Rico remained a Spanish colony until 1898, about a century longer than most Latin American countries. From being a Spanish colony, Puerto Rico went directly to being a colony of the United States. Juan Manuel Carrión sums up the Caribbean situation in the following way (Carrion 1993:67):

The Caribbean has been the quintessential colonial region of the capitalist world system. The trans-European expansion that marked the birth of this world system came together with the birth of modern colonialism. Significantly, the first colonies were established in the Caribbean and colonialism persists there up to the present. Throughout a history that encompasses five centuries, colonialism has evolved, taking new forms, in the same way that capitalism and class rule have evolved.

Both on the island and in the United States, Puerto Ricans have been at the center of transnational capitalism since it began, while remaining on the margins of capital generated by this process.⁵

Cultural imperialism also creates a sense of deterritorialization. Cultural traits travel through global circuits of commodification that are not dependent on direct colonization. Even Latin American countries that have never been actual colonies of the United States experience cultural colonization by North America. In Puerto Rico the influence is stronger. New media promotions reach San Juan before they reach Oregon where I live. McDonald's replaces yucca and plantains, English appears more and more frequently and especially in music that one hears on the radio.

Deterritorialization can refer to the forceful imposition of a culture different from your own, whether at home or abroad. It also, more literally, refers to the separation of people from the land that used to feed them. Deterritorialization for food systems researchers names the present situation where agribusiness and industrial food processing have taken over the lion's share of the world's diet (Morgan et al 2006). This is particularly clear in Puerto Rico where most of the food is imported from the United States. From 1950 to 1980 food imports have

⁴ By the 1930s 70,000 Puerto Ricans lived in New York. During the decade of the 1950s about 470,000 people left Puerto Rico for the United States. The 2000 census noted that population of Puerto Rico (3.6 million) was only about 200,000 more than the number of Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland. See Gross and McMurray for a discussion of Puerto Rican (and Algerian) music in the diaspora.

⁵ See, for example, Sidney Mintz's work on sugar cane workers in Puerto Rico and the importance of the sugar trade in Europe (1974; 1985).

increased 18-fold (del Mar et al 2001:54). At the same time, emigrants do their best to fill their suitcases with tropical tastes from home before returning to the cold north. Tucked into their bags, one might also find recordings of Puerto Rican music. Through the production and consumption of Puerto Rican music and cuisine, people can partake in a vision of Puerto Rican culture dating back to a time when people “lived off the land.”

Cultural Identity in Food and Song

Cultural identity is reflected in the food one grows and eats and the songs one sings.⁶ But if economic conditions have changed so drastically that people no longer grow and seldom eat the foods of their ancestors, just singing about the food one grows and eats fulfills the same desire for connection with a particular land. I recorded *décimas* in a variety of settings and the two dominant themes were *décima* singing itself and country life, especially procuring and consuming local foods.

The *trovadores* sang about country life in the mountains as the “good life”—this in a period after the destruction of high country agriculture by the importation of American industries. Over the last sixty years, agricultural production in Puerto Rico has become almost negligible. In the 1930s, about 43% of the island’s GNP was from agriculture, mainly sugar cane, coffee and tobacco. By 1996 the amount that agriculture contributed to the GNP had dropped to 1.2% (del Mar López, et al 2001). During the 1950s the urban population overtook the rural population and emigration to the United States almost tripled.⁷ From 1960 to 1970, the percentage of the gross national product generated by agriculture dropped from 13% to 5% (Silvestrini and Luque de Sánchez 1988) and it is even lower today.

Few *trovadores* sang about a country life they personally had left behind. Many of the singers had never really lived in the country, but they liked the musical style of the *décima* and they liked what it had come to represent: a utopic vision of country life unfettered by the

⁶ I will not go into the racial view of cultural identity in Puerto Rico, which deserves its own book. The long-standing debate over culture in Puerto Rico revolving around the hispanophile (Pedreira 1934), the Afro-Antillean (González 1993 [1980]), and the U.S. emigrant population (Flores 1993), is a residue of this long history of cultural imposition. Folk poetry and musical traditions have entered into this debate, polarizing genres a bit too rigidly into European and African camps. Local hispanophile nationalists (and folklorists as well) were drawn to the mountainous areas of the island (where African settlement was less dominant) as a laboratory in time where centuries-old folk music from Spain was still being sung by the *jibaro*, or high country farmer of European extraction. The musical forms which were more popular in coastal and urban areas—the *bomba* and the *plena* did not receive the same kind of attention, tainted as they were by being too popular (rather than traditional) and not European. Yet José Luis González informs us that the Puerto Rican farmer of the countryside had already adopted African food and dress and was much less concerned about purity than the intellectuals who wrote about him. He recounts that the 1812 census revealed an almost exact parity between the races that brought about the promulgation of the *Real Cédula de Gracias* of 1815. This was meant to re-Europeanize the white elite in the face of the increasing power of mulattos (González 1993:34-36). Pedreira (1934) claimed that the European *danza* and international boleros and *canciones* represented the backbone of the national music is representative of a movement to emphasize the importance of the culture of the Spanish elite, rather than the Afro-antillean masses.

⁷ In 1990 71.2% of the population on the island was urban, but even the majority of those living outside the city had abandoned farming.

demands of capitalism. In the well-known *décima* “*Allá en la Altura*” by Juan Morales, the *trovador* describes this bucolic life.

<p><i>Yo tengo en la serranía una finca bien sembrada desde malanga morada ñame, plátano, y yautía. Es porque al salir el día enseguida cojo el arado, el terreno preparado, señores, y lo cultivo así de feliz yo vivo, mejor que un adinerado.</i>⁸</p>	<p>I have in the mountains a well-planted farm from purple malanga yams, plantains, and yautía. It’s because at sun rise I immediately grab my plow, the ground prepared, people, and I cultivate it Thus I live happily, better than a rich person.</p>
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There are several examples of popular *décimas* which claim that the poor person surrounded by beauties of nature in the mountains lives better than the rich person. This same theme is used in diasporic *décimas* to express the preference for staying in Puerto Rico, rather than emigrating in the hope of becoming rich in the United States. While there is little correlation between increased wealth and increased happiness, the intense poverty of many rural families in Puerto Rico who suffered under the evils of the pass-book system was certainly a cause of stress.⁹ There is such a close association between *décima* singers and the highland peasantry that many *trovadores* take the name of *jibaro* and wear the distinctive hat associated with the role.¹⁰

Jibaro has come to stand for the quintessential Puerto Rican. This nostalgic view of the past is very much a contemporary device that is popular because it is acceptable to a wide range of viewpoints. Whether you are for independence, the commonwealth, or statehood; whether you are Catholic or Protestant, you can still make a stand for Puerto Rican culture by singing about the riches of the land and the life of the *jibaro*.¹¹

The Institute of Puerto Rican Culture listed one hundred and five *décima* improvisers on their 1988 list. This mainly represented *trovadores* who had competed in national improvisation contests. Many others were not listed. Old people tend not to compete and new *trovadores* are being formed all the time. Rather than one or a couple *décima* singers being the “bearers of tradition” within a community, *trovadores* appear to have formed their own community. In many

⁸ You can hear Juan Morales Ramos singing *Allá en la Altura* at the wonderful Puerto Rican Cuatro Project multimedia site <http://www.cuatro-pr.org/Home/Audio/Indexaudio/Instrmusaudio/Genres/Cantaores/HermanosMorales/Mejoradinerado.mp3>.

⁹ The pass-book system restricted the movement of laborers and criminalized their failure to obtain work (Lewis 1963). See González 1989 for a non-nostalgic description of country life in Puerto Rico before World War II.

¹⁰ Already in 1935, Pedreira notes that the word *jibaro* has changed from being pejorative to being a title of honor and many who claim this title are not really *jibaros* (in Laguerre and Melón 1968:7, 19).

¹¹ Carrión contrasts the relatively weak political and electoral manifestations of Puerto Rican nationalism with the very strong current of cultural nationalism affecting all formal political pronouncements (1993:69).

ways it is like a subculture.¹² *Trovadores* exist in all parts of the island, though particular towns have clusters of them. There was a great deal of participant overlap in the various singing events I attended. The singers knew each other and spoke of one another with warmth and generosity. This is epitomized by events in which they honor a particular *trovador*. Typically, fellow singers compose songs extolling his or her virtues and present this person with plaques, often painted with personalized *décimas*.¹³ Often they charge admission to these *homenajes* and the proceeds go to the person being honored (if they have a great financial need)—otherwise, they are split up among the organizers.

Improvisation competitions have been documented for some time in Puerto Rico as in the rest of the Caribbean. I have heard and read about numerous *décima* competitions in Puerto Rico where two men alternate verses about a particular topic in dialog with one another. In its most common form every composed verse ended with the same line. These events were extremely personalized as they were designed to demonstrate the superior intelligence of one man over another and they were often carried out to impress particular female onlookers at community festivals. It was not uncommon for these contests to end in physical fights. A competitive form between one man and one woman also exists. This type often takes the form of a stylized war between the sexes.

Today, more impersonal improvisation contests are sponsored by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, the Department of Tourism, and Bacardi Rum. Winning the admiration of one's community, one's gender or a particular loved one has been somewhat overshadowed by monetary prizes. On an island with 40% unemployment, monetary compensation encourages the development of improvisation and singing skills.

Festival del Jobo

One impressive example of Puerto Rican improvisation and singing skills took place at the Festival del Jobo, outside of Comerío. Twenty people competed in the *décima* improvisation contest. Nineteen of these were men who ranged in age from sixteen to about sixty, but most were around thirty-five. The other participant was a thirteen year-old girl, Victoria Sanabria, who ended up winning second prize much to everyone's delight. (Especially thrilled were her two older brothers who also competed.) Each of the twenty contestants improvised two ten-line verses based on a *pie forzado* which is an eight-syllable line given to the *trovador* minutes before s/he begins to sing. It forms the tenth line of each verse they compose and determines the rhyme for lines six and seven according to the *Espinel* rhyme scheme of *abbaaccddc*.¹⁴ Six finalists were chosen and they each composed an additional 3 verses, giving us a total of 58 verses.

¹² See Hannerz (1992) for a discussion of complex society and the nature of subcultures and Slobin (1993) for a more in-depth discussion of how musical subcultures work.

¹³ Most *trovadores* have walls covered with plaques and trophies.

¹⁴ The poet credited with developing the *décima* in its most elegant form is Vicente Espinel whose *Diversas Rimas* came out in 1591. His name is given to the rhyme scheme that has chased out all the others from contemporary *décima* production in Puerto Rico: *ABBAACCDDC* known as an *Espinela*. Pedro Escabí has analyzed

The Festival del Jobo was held in a pasture wedged between two steep green mountains. It ran from about three pm to eight pm on the fourth of July. Only once during the competition was it mentioned that this was a national holiday and none of the typical references and signs that one hears and sees on the mainland were evident here. In the initial song before the contest began, however, a *trovador* sang that he felt badly for people who suffer hunger and pain because their government is not on their side. They sleep on the sidewalks in all kinds of weather because they lack freedom, a homeland, and a flag. He left this subject rather abruptly to begin singing about the improvisation competition that was about to begin. Perhaps, he saw the *décima* contest as a remedy to the lack of dignity that poor people suffer when their own way of life is devalued. He ended with verses telling the competitors, in the name of Borinquén (the Taíno word for Puerto Rico), to sing and compete well and God would give them luck.

Next, Miguel Santiago, a well-known *trovador* from Comerío, followed with the rules of the contest or a public announcement of the formal devices:¹⁵

You're going to see two paper bags in the hands of two distinguished ladies who will be with us here on stage. In one bag will be the name of the *trovador* . . . who will come up to the microphone, and in the other will be the *pie forzado* by which the singer will have to improvise. Each *trovador* must compose two *décimas*. We have a list of 20 *trovadores*. Two *décimas* from each *trovador* with the *pie forzado* that he himself will pull out of the paper bag. The criteria that will be evaluated . . . this afternoon in this *trovador* contest are the following: Each *trovador* will have a total of 100 points in each *décima*. 100 points which will be evaluated in the following manner: The entrance of the *trovador* with the music—5 points—(how the *trovador* enters with the music). The rhyme that the *trovador* uses, correct consonantal rhyme, will have a weight of 35 points. The timing that the *trovador* has with the music; (remember that the *décima* is sung; one must be in time with the music)—this criterion will have a weight of 10 points. The content, the body of the *décima*, what the *trovador* says in his *décima*, what is the message that he brings to the one who listens to him—this will have a weight of 35 points. And the closing of the *décima*, how does it close, how does the *décima* go with the *pie forzado* and how does it close on that note—15 points. Which makes up a total of 100 points in each *décima*.

He then introduced the judges and said they were very competent and were chosen with great care. “They are good *trovadores* themselves who know about the art form and they are honest and serious.” The judges indexed this honesty and seriousness at several points during the contest by stepping up to the microphone. They emphasized that they do not discriminate according to sex or age or place of origin. They only judge *décimas*. Once a judge explained the meaning of a local dialect word in a *pie forzado* to a competing *trovador*. Another time a judge announced that the transposition we heard of two letters in a proper name in a *pie forzado* would

Espinel's verse and found that only a small portion were of this rhyme scheme, which became more popular with Lope de Vega. (Personal communication.)

¹⁵ Santiago had his own radio show on the weekend and also taught school.

not be marked as an error. One judge got up and announced his self-dismissal when his nephew got up to compete.

Each *trovador* came on stage when his or her name was drawn out of a brown paper bag. The first thing the *trovador* did was to ask the band-leader for a particular *seis* tune. The *seis fajardeño* was the most popular, but others chosen included *seis de andino* and *seis milonguero*. There are faster *seises*, like the *seis chorreao*, to which only the most advanced *trovadores* attempt to improvise. The music is very important for it constrains the number of syllables in a line to approximately eight.¹⁶ After choosing their music, the *trovador* drew his/her *pie forzado* out of the second paper bag and handed it to Miguel Santiago to read to the audience. After reading it, Santiago handed it back to the singer who hung onto the slip of paper and occasionally referred back to it. One *trovador* told me of a time when he forgot his *pie forzado*, so holding onto the slip of paper while singing would insure against that, but sometimes it seemed that it was just a nervous tick or that they were stressing the fact that this was originally a literary form and had its base in writing.

Upon hearing the singer's choice of tune, the band immediately started playing. For the first verse or two of the song, the singer indexed the process of thinking through raising eyes, looking very serious and sometimes touching finger to cheek. In what seemed like an incredibly short time, the *trovador* began singing verses. I, for one, was totally astounded at their mastery of the form. The singers' demeanor changed the moment the singing began from an inward thoughtful stance to an outward didactic performance. Looking into the audience, the singers declaimed their verses, reaching out to the listeners, often punctuating the rhythm of the *décima* with arm movements.

As I listened to the songs, I thought that I was hearing formulas. This turned out not to be the case, the similarities coming instead from the repetition of themes. Reading through transcripts of the 58 improvised verses, the major themes that emerged were music or poetry (referring specifically to the *décima* form and its composition) and life in the country where people work hard on the land, eat traditional foods, and enjoy the beautiful scenery. Deictic references emphasizing a co-presence in time and space were also plentiful as is common in improvisatory traditions. This category overlaps with the previous two categories, since the event at hand was an improvisation contest in the mountains. Of the 26 separate performances (20 participants and repeat performances by the six finalists) 17 evoked some aspect of country life in the mountains, 17 made mention of poetry, music, or the act of creating or improvising *décimas*, and 17 made local references to the scenery, the festival and even the weather. At least one of these three themes occurred in all 26 songs and all but four of the songs contained more than one of these three themes.

The word is an important linguistic entity to the *trovador*. Good *trovadores* have large vocabularies. This allows them to improvise without repeating a word, to draw from a large set of rhyming words and to have a group of synonyms to draw from depending on the number of syllables they need to fill out an eight-syllable line. Several *trovadores* I interviewed cited reading as a way to expand one's vocabulary. I was told about *trovadores* of little formal

¹⁶ White (2001) stresses the importance of lyric-to-music match in the Basque *bertsolaritza* improvisation tradition.

education who knew such arcane words that university-educated people had to look them up in a dictionary. Only one person I interviewed had a copy of a rhyming dictionary and he had just received it from a friend, so he hadn't yet been able to use it when composing *décimas*. If a subject is important in the *décima* texts, words within particular semantic clusters will have a high occurrence. Operating on this principle, I counted what seemed to be the most salient of these clusters within the corpus: *décima* singing and country life.

Décima Singing

I found a total of 75 words referring to song, poetry, the act of singing or this particular context for singing. The two words that appeared the most in the 58 verses of the competition were “*canto/ar*” which was used 15 times and “*verso*” which was used 16 times. “*Décima*” (in its various forms) occurred eight times, “*rima*” three times, “*canción*” four times, “*Espinel*” once, “*pie forzado*” once. Variations on “*trovar*” occurred nine times and variations of “*improvisar*” six times. All these words refer to the song form itself. Other words referred to the event that was taking place. “*Festival*” comes up seven times, “*público (-a)*” was mentioned five times, “*concurso/concurrencia*” four times and “*competencia*” twice. Here's an example sung by Victoria Sanabria. The number of syllables and the final rhyme is noted after each line. When the final syllable in a line is stressed, as it is in the first five lines of her verse, it counts as two syllables. Vowels that come together within or between words count as one syllable.

<i>Mis versos buenos serán</i>	8 a	My verses will be good
<i>porque así lo quiere Diós</i>	8 b	because God wants it like that
<i>y he de brindarlos a los</i>	8 b	and I must toast those
<i>presentes que ahora aquí están</i>	9 a	present who are here now
<i>y a los que pronto vendrán</i>	8 a	and those who will soon arrive
<i>a esta grande concurrencia.</i>	8 c	at this great contest.
<i>Es dura la competencia</i>	8 c	The competition is hard
<i>pero me encuentro segura</i>	8 d	but I feel sure
<i>defendiendo la cultura</i>	8 d	defending the culture
<i>en la luz de la conciencia.</i>	8 c	in the light of consciousness.

She continues the theme of *décima* singing in her second composition for the final round. In this verse, only lines 8 and 9 deviate from the standard pattern. However, Victoria was able to sing them in such a way that they followed the music and therefore their deviation wasn't noticeable. The rhyme scheme like in the previous example is a perfect *Espinela*.

<i>Cuando miro al alto pico</i>	8 a	When I look at the high peak
<i>yo continúo mi canción</i>	8 b	I continue my song
<i>y la doy de corazón</i>	8 b	and I give it from my heart
<i>a mi hermoso Puerto Rico,</i>	8 a	to my beautiful Puerto Rico,
<i>al grande también al chico</i>	8 a	to the old as well as the young
<i>porque no hay ningún duelo</i>	8 c	because there's no grief

<i>de décima cubre el velo</i>	8 c	in a <i>décima</i> -covered veil
<i>que en una improvisación buena</i>	9 d	that in a good improvisation
<i>yo sigo en mi faena</i>	8 d	I resume my labor
<i>una canción del riachuelo.</i>	8 c	a song of the brook.

Country Life

The second salient theme in the composed verses revolved around country living. As I mentioned earlier, *décima* singers closely identify with the *jíbaro*, or peasant. In this contest the word “*jíbaro*” or “*jíbarito*” occurred nine times, “*campesino(-a)*” three times and “*agricultor*” twice. In most cases, the singer used this adjective to refer to himself as in:

<i>Yo soy un jíbaro neto</i>	I'm a pure <i>jíbaro</i>
<i>boricua ciento por ciento</i>	100 percent Puerto Rican
<i>y Dios me ha dado el talento</i>	and God gave me the talent
<i>de ser un cantor completo.</i> ¹⁷	to be a complete singer.

Agricultural tools like hoes and picks are referenced, along with planted fields and land. “*Plantío*” is sung twice and “*terreno*” or “*tierra*” four times. The types of homes that used to be common in the countryside that still retain their Taíno names, “*bohío*” (shack) and “*batey*” (communal yard) were mentioned five times. The type of agriculture indexed in the songs is not the once-expansive sugar cane plantations of the coastal regions, but smaller subsistence farms in the mountains. Coffee was a common crop grown on these small farms in the mountains and “*café*” was included five times in the festival verses. (Three of those times, however, were in the *pie forzado*, “*Otros moliendo café.*”) The word “*montaña*” occurred five times, “*sierra*” once, “*serranía*” once, “*altura*” twice, “*colina*” twice, “*pico*” once, and “*loma*” twice, or 14 direct references to being in the mountains.

The following verses that Marcelino Ortiz composed for the final round present a good example of the nostalgic focus on agricultural life in the mountains. Like other descriptions of the *jíbaro*, Ortiz stresses his simplicity, humility, and honor.

<i>Yo aprendí a coser tabaco</i>	8 a	I learned to sew ¹⁸ tobacco
<i>también la caña corté</i>	8 b	also I cut cane
<i>y recogí yo café</i>	8 b	and I gathered coffee
<i>y a echarme al hombro un saco</i>	8 a	and throwing on my shoulder a sack
<i>mi pasado lo destaco</i>	8 a	my past I stress
<i>y lo digo con placer</i>	8 c	and say with pleasure
<i>allí quisiera volver.</i>	8 c	I would like to return there.

¹⁷ Marcos Collazo.

¹⁸ The use of *coser* might be a back translation from the English homonym “sew/sow.” However, it is also quite possible that the singer is referring to the stage in the processing of tobacco when leaves are sewn together and put on drying racks.

<i>Por eso lo digo aquí</i>	8 d	For that reason I say here
<i>sí, representan para mí</i>	9 d	yes, they represent for me
<i>las costumbres del ayer.</i>	8 c	the customs of yesterday
<i>Como tengo sencillez</i>	8 a	As I have simplicity
<i>hoy digo una realidad</i>	8 b	today I speak a reality
<i>yo aprendí por mi humildad</i>	8 b	I learned by my humbleness
<i>lo que vale la honradez.</i>	8 a	what honor is worth.
<i>Lo viví una sola vez</i>	8 a	I lived it only one time
<i>y la quisiera obtener</i>	8 c	and I would like to obtain it
<i>porque no quiero caer.</i>	8 c	because I don't want to fall.
<i>Por eso esto cultivo</i>	8 d	That's why I cultivate this
<i>y pone en mi el motivo</i>	8 d	and it gives me the reason for
<i>las costumbres del ayer.</i>	8 c	the customs of yesterday
<i>Yo sé lo que es el amor</i>	8 a	I know what love is
<i>de uno que era en tierra</i>	8 b	of one who was on the land
<i>cuando su dicha se encierra</i>	8 b	when love's joy is embraced
<i>y trabaja con sudor.</i>	8 a	and works by the sweat of his brow.
<i>Porque sé darle valor</i>	8 a	Because I know how to value it
<i>y sé ganar y perder,</i>	8 c	and I know how to win and lose,
<i>mas no quiero recaer</i>	8 c	but I don't want to relapse
<i>y quiero que se motiven</i>	8 d	and I want you to be motivated
<i>porque en este jíbaro viven</i>	9 d	because in this <i>jíbaro</i> live
<i>las costumbres del ayer.</i>	8 c	the customs of before.

Defendiendo la Cultura: Reflexivity and Reterritorialization

Décima singing has become amalgamated with a certain version of Puerto Rican culture. In the Festival del Jobo, “*cultura*” was mentioned six times in the improvisations and in all but one of these instances it referred anaphorically to the art of singing *décimas*. It occurs in the only repeated line (which was not a *pie forzado*) in the competition, “*Defendiendo la cultura.*” The image of defending the culture was commonly used by *trovadores* who, in conversation, often use the words “defend,” “culture,” and “*décima*” in close proximity. At one event the *trovador*, Eduardo Gorritz, was introduced as “*el defensor de lo nuestro*” or “the defender of what is ours.” At two other improvisation contests, I heard the line “*Quien gana es la cultura*” in a personification of Culture itself winning the improvisation contest no matter who the individual winner might be.

Cultural reflexivity (discourse within a culture about the culture) was prominent in this event and others involving *décima* singing. This is mirrored in the *décima* verses about the *décima* and the act of composing *décimas*. There is an understood link between the two arenas of reflexivity, not just because *décima* singing is a part of Puerto Rican culture, but because

trovadores present the *décima* as the sine qua non of authentic Puerto Rican culture. But the *trovador* does not simply sing about this imagined idyllic life identified with Puerto Rican culture. In a metonymic shift, singing *décimas* comes to stand for country living. *Décima* singing used to be an integral part of life in the countryside. Now, singing *décimas* is all that is left of this life to most people who work as waged labor or collect unemployment in the towns and cities.

Reflexivity in the genre has increased parallel to the increasing distance from the *jíbaro* or country way of life. Before, *jíbaros* sang *décimas*. Now, singing *décimas* makes one a *jíbaro* and being a *jíbaro* makes a person “one hundred percent Puerto Rican.” The absent activity of working the land becomes re-activated in song lyrics. *Trovadores* speak of “*cultivando*” the *décima* in the same way that people cultivate the ground for planting. Likewise in Sanabria’s verse above, she uses “*faena*” to refer to her work of improvising *décimas* when it is more commonly used to refer to agricultural labor. In this way, *décimas* are brought “down to earth,” so to speak, and a de-territorialized Puerto Rican culture is re-territorialized in symbolic agricultural labor.

It is also evident in the songs that *trovadores* recognize that both the agricultural way of life and the oral traditions that accompanied it are in danger of disappearing. This is reflected in typical *décima* lines like “If our culture disappears,” “Already our folklore is being forgotten,” and “The customs of yesterday.” This recognition of a way of life that is slipping away causes this subculture to redouble its efforts to perpetuate *décima* singing and to symbolically re-territorialize Puerto Rican culture in the Puerto Rican countryside, not in the burgeoning cities of San Juan, Ponce, New York, and Philadelphia.

Well-known *décimas* warn against migrating. Ramito’s “*Me quedo en Puerto Rico*” is one of those. Here, he sings about how cold it is and how the only peak you can see is the top of the Empire State Building. He asks God to look after his Puerto Rico where *yautía*, *ñame* and *penapén* grow. In the final verse, he addresses the *jíbaro* directly and tells him “Never sell your land.”

The reflexivity that looms so important in *décimas* has affected the attitude toward the formal constraints of the genre. This has narrowed the range of acceptable forms. Rather than harking back to the form used by the *jíbaros* in the mountains with whom they identify, the literate *trovadores* of today by-pass oral poetry and reach back to written forms of the *Siglo de Oro* in Spain. Where once several rhyme schemes were acceptable, now only the *Espinela* is considered correct. Another example of increasing rigidity is that assonance, which used to be a perfectly acceptable way to rhyme, is now considered incorrect. Full rhyme has become a requirement in all the contests. One young amateur singer expressed regret that the *décima* had become so refined. He said that several young people he knew were afraid to compose them anymore.¹⁹

Even more indicative of the formalism in contemporary *décima* production is an insistence on the primacy of graphemic representation over sound, or the written over the oral. It is not enough that the words rhyme, they should be spelled with the same grapheme. In other

¹⁹ This mirrors the way discourses of linguistic purity plague language revitalization projects as they impede young people from speaking the endangered languages for fear of making mistakes (Gross 2007).

words, you cannot rhyme “*paz*” (/pas/) with “*más*” (/mas/) because the former is written with a final “z” and the latter with an “s.” Granted, these words would not be consonantal rhymes in Castilian Spanish, but they are throughout Latin America where the rules are being made. There are other examples of how local pronunciation is shunted aside in favor of graphemic representation. In Puerto Rican Spanish “r” and “l” are often pronounced the same, yet it is not considered correct to rhyme “*ideal*” with “*cantar*” and “*palmar*” (as was done by one of the contestants) even if the final sound is identical in the dialect of the singer. Likewise, the final “s” is often deleted in Puerto Rican Spanish, but *trovadores* were counted down for rhyming, for example, “*cocina*” with “*divinas*.” This was done four times in the Festival del Jobo by different contestants. Note that no one says that the singer’s pronunciation should change to reflect the orthography, only that when creating a rhyme in improvisation, one must carry an image in one’s mind of the word correctly spelled. Many *trovadores* in past generations were illiterate, so it is difficult to imagine that matching letters in words was of great concern.

While on one hand, local pronunciation takes a back seat to spelling conventions, on the other hand, the use of local vocabulary is highly regarded as indicating the rootedness of the form in Puerto Rico, and not elsewhere. Taíno words such as “*bohío*,” “*areíto*” and “*batey*” were common as well as those with African origins like “*mangó*” (considered a very hard word to find a rhyme for since it’s accented on the last syllable) and “*ñame*.” Names of local food and drink like “*cuchifritos*,” “*lechón*,” and rum and local fish like “*guabina*” and “*guabara*” were used in competition *décimas*.

Even though the Puerto Rican people continue to leave the country for the city and the city for the mainland, the words of *décimas* serve to symbolically re-territorialize Puerto Rican culture. This is also seen in the frequent recounting of Puerto Rican place names outside the big cities: *Juana Díaz*, *Utua*, and *barrio de Caguana* were all included in festival verses. I mentioned earlier the numerous references to being in the mountains, but I should also mention that the stage was set up in front of a river and words for river were used eight times in the contest. Comerío, the nearest town, was mentioned nine times in addition to occurring in a *pie forzado* where it was repeated twice. On an even more specific level, “*barrio Higüero*” and “*El Jobo*,” indexed exactly where the festival was being held. These place names were mentioned six and four times respectively.

Conclusion

It became clear to me that rather than merely stating ideas about cultural identity, the *décima* has come to embody Puerto Rican culture, at least for the numerous *trovadores* who see themselves in the role of soldiers defending their national patrimony. Cultural reflexivity, born of a series of cultural displacements, has led to both a rigidification of the *décima* form and an emphasis on connecting *décima* verses with the Puerto Rican landscape. The image of Puerto Rican culture involves a romantic rejection of present existence and the nostalgic longing for a

golden past.²⁰ This imaginary edenic vision describes an agricultural past in the highlands of Puerto Rico, far from the anomie engendered by emigration and living in cities. The singers feel they have to defend their culture against the onslaught of globalization and the de-territorialization that comes with it. The United States, while colonizing the island, has taken over the airwaves with American music from the mainland and has made English the language of economic success. With this background, it is not surprising that resistance takes the form of composing intricate verses in Spanish and singing about the joys of living on little money in the mountains outside global commodity circuits.²¹

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²⁰ See Gross and Mark (2001) to see how nostalgia is employed in Occitan rap music and McMurray (2001) for a discussion of how migration promotes nostalgia in Northern Morocco.

²¹ I was introduced to the Puerto Rican *décima* when I worked at the Philadelphia Folklore Project and visited Norris Square Senior Center when they were having a fiesta and a couple of the residents were improvising *décimas*. Later I participated in Richard Bauman's NEH project on the octosyllabic line in Latin American verbal art. Puerto Rican students Jorge Martínez and Yolanda López served as research assistants and Mónica Rojas helped with transcription. Yolanda's assistance in Puerto Rico made the fieldwork extremely efficient and a pleasure. I especially want to thank Alberto Medina and all the *trovadores* in Puerto Rico who gave generously of their time and knowledge. All translations are by the author, with help from María Olaya.

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