

“Décimarinas” and iDécimas

Vincent Toro

“Décimarinas” and “iDécimas” are two complementary suites of poems I wrote for my collection titled “Stereo.Island.Mosaic.” The book is conceptually inspired by the work of the Caribbean literary theorist Armando Benitez-Rojo, particularly his assertion that for Caribbean people time does not move on a single plane in a single direction, but rather it moves multilaterally like sea currents, back and forth, inside and outside, upward and downward, all simultaneously.

I wanted to represent this movement in the sonic, visual, and narrative aspects of the poems. Additionally, I was thinking about the Negritude movement, particularly the work of Aimé Césaire and his declaration in “Notebook on a Return to the Native Land” that as colonization has shredded and mangled our history and our identity it was our opportunity, our responsibility, to reinvent for ourselves a new identity from the shattered pieces that were left behind on the shores of our islands.

This work was an attempt for me to re-contextualize Puerto Rican identity for the 21st century and ask what it means to be Caribbean or to be Latino in a globalized world where your online social status increasingly seems more significant to formulating an identity than your blood-line, your language, your religion, your geography of birth. Initially, I saw only danger in this negotiation, but as I worked I continually heard the voices of Benitez-Rojo and Césaire reminding me that it does not have to be an either/or decision, but that in the Postmodern era the artist functions as a kind of cultural DJ piecing the self together as a collage. The past and the future could be deconstructed then reconstructed through juxtaposition of symbols, styles, and methods -- a poetic xenochrony, to coopt a musical concept created by Frank Zappa (as I was working to hybridize opposing concepts and to use symbols and sounds out of context, I was also working with the notion of applying structures and methods in music, visual arts, and the sciences to try to get the poems to function as songs or paintings or architectural works).

This xenochrony was attempted in the “Décimarinas” and “iDécimas” by juxtaposing a centuries-old form with images and vernacular of the technological age, and to retell or reconstruct often overlooked events significant in the history of the colonization of Puerto Rico. The *décima* is a poetry and song form invented by Vicente Espinel during the late 1500s. It is a ten line stanza consisting of octosyllabic lines with a rhyme scheme of *ABBAACCDDC*. The subject matter of the poems is often philosophical, religious, lyrical, or political in nature. As songs they are often improvised, and as a result, the eight syllable line requirement is a loose one. Some lines may be seven or nine syllables long. The form survives today most prominently as the structure of the Puerto Rican musical style known as the *Plena*.

By framing these poems inside the *décima* structure while experimenting with syntax familiar to Contemporary American poetry I was hoping that the poems would not only make material the transnational nature of the postmodern Caribbean of the 21st century, but also to imbibe the poems with the sense that time folds in on itself, superimposing the past onto possible futures to re-envision the present. Thus, in the 1st series, “Décimarinas,” the poems examine events of the colonization of Puerto Rico in *décima* form, but each section moves backwards in time, beginning with the student protests at the University of Puerto Rico in 2010 and ending with the first rebellion by the Taino Indians against the Conquistadors. The second series, “iDécimas,” is where the experimental leap is made. This series is a commentary on the construction of a virtual self and the colonization of the human by the machine of online social networking set into the archaic *décima* form to signify the unseen but omnipresent constrictions of trying to invent a self through the instrument of a limited platform designed by programmers, a space where the body becomes secondary to the accumulation of images and slogans. In the second series, the events of the first become irrelevant, though the architectural spine of the first still exists, a kind of residue still influencing the postmodern body without the body necessarily being aware of the influence of that residue.

These poems, and the larger collection, are experiments in hybridization. At the earliest stages of constructing “Stereo.Island.Mosaic.” my aim was to move beyond the traditionally accepted references and tropes in poems about Latino identity. I hoped to expose the limitless possibility that springs from being born transnational, translingual, transtemporal

and postcolonial, postmodern, posthuman. “Décimarinas” and “iDécimas” are the polar axes that bind the new map that has been charted from these experiments.

Décimarinas

San Juan, 2010

Fortuño, strokes his tie, cocksure,
simpers at the camera crew,
bloviates, then kneels at his pew
before ordering the seizure
of the college. Suits of azure
sweep the campus with pepper spray
and boot heels, a pill to allay
both student umbrage and the fears
of tourists and lenders. Veneers
patched. Luis jettisoned, with pay.

Queens, 1955

Cast from the hillsides. Shipped as freight
from one isla to another.
Swiped like orphans from their mothers.
The promise of work hung like bait.
La Guardia became the gate
offering you a safe return
once you’ve torn your tendons to earn
the fare back. Your plot is re-soiled.
Few will rise from out of the coiled
snakes throat to reclaim their sunburns.

Vincent Toro

Rincon, 1771

Don Rincon was appointed heir
to his master's plush plantation
which, as their remuneration,
he returned to those who took care
of the land but who never shared
its bounty. In decades a brand
of migrants yearning to be tanned
will swipe it, demand mofongo
from the natives while, like mangos
rotting, their faint feet stain the land.

Guaorabo River, 1511

Salcedo desired four guides
from Urayoan to deliver
him unsoaked across the river
Guaorabo, as if one could ride
a man like a horse, as if tides
could be bullied. The four men hauled
Salcedo halfway until they
were stricken with the urge to test
the Spaniard's presumed deathlessness.
They submerged him until nightfall,

doggedly holding him to the floor
of the riverbed to be sure
his spirit no longer endured.
Once they were convinced their captors
were mortals the four went before
Urayoan to share the news.
Caciques convened. The ruse
was dispelled, the driven mule kicked,
the cay shook as they raised the wick
of rebellion and lit the fuse.

iDécimas

1.

I am an icon.
Page when double
On my status.
I've gone viral,
I am a case
Text without context,
Content,
Mecha-molting,
For skin contact,
With the right apps

My profile
clicked updates you
One million views,
less man than file,
of Tweets gone wild.
discontent
my skype is omniscient.
I'm the new breed.
there is no need.
I'm transcendent.

2.

My news feed bleeds
Of protestors
Coast, in Saint Paul,
for the latest
smear ads
I can fix it all
on your wall.
on your thread
in the movement.
to appraise

minced reflections
in the Ivory
rote eulogies
dead thespian,
for the next election.
by posting
Can prove by boasting
that I'm a vanguard
I wield a card
the bird now roasting.

3.

Lodge this web
Crack spines
Splice pick up
boats were once
are firewalls
Generate culture
and distortion.
mainframes and mind frames.
self from serf.
Cyborg hubris

until the face bloats.
and decipher streams.
lines with scripture. Steam
people. The new moats
of misapplied quotes.
from feedback
Digimyth. Hack
Cellophane
A legerdemain.
slyly bushwacked.