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# Isleno Decima Singers of Louisiana: an interpretation of performance and event

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ISLENO DECIMA SINGERS OF LOUISIANA:  
AN INTERPRETATION OF PERFORMANCE AND EVENT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

In

The Department of Communication Studies

by  
Danielle Elise Sears  
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## Abstract

This study is a metaperformance autoethnography of the Isleno decima singers of Saint Bernard Parish, Louisiana. The performance and event of the decima are explored using research techniques including the performance of ethnography. First a basis is provided for the study by presenting a brief historical overview of the Spanish influence in Saint Bernard Parish, Louisiana. The work of Richard Bauman in Verbal Art as Performance is included in order to key the decima as a performance event. Second, the script, “A Tribute to Storytellers: Isleno Decima Singers of Louisiana,” performed at Louisiana State University in The HopKins Black Box Theatre, is included to demonstrate the research process of the decima. Third, the study analyzes and interprets the performance of the script in order to explore audience critique and the learning process of performing research as a way of knowing. This study concludes with a performative writing piece addressing my relationship to the study as a member of the Isleno community and scholarly researcher as well as future possibilities of research and performative studies of the Isleno traditions.

## Chapter One: Introduction

The purpose of this research has been to investigate one of the oral traditional verbal arts of Spanish speaking communities in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, which dates back to the eighteenth century. These communities are located southeast of New Orleans, Louisiana, and are strategically located along the Mississippi River region to take advantage of the area's rich natural resources. These communities have remained fairly isolated from urbanization for over two hundred years. Due to the isolation of these communities, they are the only Spanish speaking villages southeast of New Orleans, Louisiana. The geographic isolation and lack of formal education of the people in these communities led them to rely heavily on their oral traditions as a form of history as well as entertainment.

The most famous oral traditional art within these communities is the locally inspired and invented narrative song known as the decima. Decimas have been traced back to the Canary Islands over two hundred years ago, and some scholars believe that they have found sources for the decima in fifteenth century Spain. The decima was composed and performed for a specific audience, the Spanish speaking communities of St. Bernard Parish. These songs were sung at events in the communities, such as dances, weddings, and holiday celebrations. The decima stands as the only historical verbal art still in practice amongst the members of these communities. As Richard Bauman explains, "Oral performance, like all human activity, is situated, its form, meaning, and functions rooted in culturally defined scenes or events—bounded segments of the flow of behavior and experience that constitute meaningful contexts for action, interpretation and evaluation" (3). My effort in this study has been to describe and interpret the verbal art of the decima as or in terms of performance—as deeply "situated" behavior whose

meaning and function cannot be understood apart from the events and contexts of its transmission.

This study includes my own research as an ethnographer in Performance Studies. The information gathered outside of the research literature included recorded interviews with members from St. Bernard Parish, as well as participant-observations of the events in which the decimas are performed today. My informants ranged from those who still compose and sing the decimas, to those who remember the events where the decimas were sung in the past, to those whose knowledge of the decimas was acquired indirectly from their experience of living in the community of the Islenos. The interviewees included both men and women between the ages of 53 and 100, all of whom currently reside in Saint Bernard Parish, Louisiana with the exception of Joseph “Chelito” Campo who died in 1998. The interviewees were accessible due to the fact that all were part of my extended family or friends of my parents. Because I am a community member and an Isleno descendent, the level of comfort and ease in conversation was pleasingly high. All of the interviews were documented using a range of recording devices including note taking, audio-taping and video recording. Following each interview, the material gathered was then reviewed and transcribed.

My main informant for my research was Mr. Irvan Perez. Irvan Perez is in his late seventies and has lived in Saint Bernard Parish since birth. He is one of the last remaining decima singers or decimeros of the community. He is a renowned folk artist and singer who has performed at festivals all over Louisiana, as well as at Carnegie Hall and in front of the Canary Island Government in the Canary Islands. He was awarded the American Heritage Award from the National Endowment for the Arts by President George Bush in 1991. Irvan Perez has given generously his time and energy as a spokesperson of the community for many researchers

interested in Saint Bernard's Spanish history and heritage. He is one of the principal reasons why the oral traditions of the Spanish in Saint Bernard Parish have been preserved to such a great extent. The other members of the community who so graciously helped with this research include Helen Morales Alfonso, Anthony Campo Jr., Antonia Gonzales, Linda Campo Sears, and Kenneth Sears.

This study is not only funded by my work as an ethnographer but also as a performer. Using the research gathered for this study, I have translated the material by composing a performance of my own that sought not only to recreate the distinctive characteristics of the decima performances, but also to evoke interpretively the enabling contexts of history, memory, recollection, and community in which the decimas become meaningful to the Islenos to whom they belong. This study then features the script of the hour-long performance I created and have presented to audiences over the past two years. The script includes narratives collected from interviews, personal information, poetry, prose, movement, and images collaged in a style indicative of performative writing. That is, the scripting served not simply as a representation of what I learned about the decimas during my research, but also as a mode of inquiry into my fieldwork (Strine, Long, and HopKins 186). More significantly, as Shannon Jackson has noted of her own ethnographic performance, "it provided a flexible space in which themes and interpretations developed through association and juxtaposition, allowing me an alternative way to discover what it was I had to say and what it was I wished to critique" (26). The performance of the research enhanced my ability to attend to ,acquire knowledge, and understand the object of study the decima.

This study limits itself to the oral tradition of the decima from the people of St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana. Other Spanish speaking communities in Louisiana are not included in this



research. Also, other oral traditions of the Spanish such as riddles, proverbs and folktales in St. Bernard Parish are not included in this study. The performance of the decimas and the metaperformance of the script allow only the voices of those interviewed, as well as my own personal viewpoints and experiences. The study represents the art form of the decima in terms of what Bauman might call its “situatedness” in discrete contexts, practices, and memories. It is not a generalization of the community’s culture or of the traditional practices of its members. This study is one representation of a cultural art form generated by a community of which I am a member, resulting in a performative perspective reflective of my own and others’ experiences as community member, researcher, and performer.

### **Review of Literature**

The texts used in this study have relied upon orality as a research method, subject, translation and interpretation through both performance event and written documentation. The three main subcategories of my research comprise the areas of oral tradition and history of the Isleno community, context centered anthropological perspectives of folklore and oral poetics, and ethnographic performative research methods. Drawing from these three categories, my study further examines the performance aspects of the event within the oral tradition of the decima.

There have been limited yet significant scholarly texts documenting the Spanish influence in Saint Bernard Parish, Louisiana. Texts that are available incorporate information pertaining to the history, language and folklore of the Spanish in Louisiana. With the Isleno community depending on their oral traditions as a source of tracing their community background, these texts have been invaluable in that they use the method of collecting oral history to document their research. In these texts, however, I discovered a lack of emphasis on the customs

of oral traditions and practice in the Isleno community, particularly the decima. I also realized the need for more research regarding the decima as a performance event, particularly the collection of information as an active, participatory process.

In Samuel Armistead's The Spanish Traditions in Louisiana, a collection of oral traditions from the Isleno communities of St. Bernard Parish is recorded through a historical perspective tracing the folk literature to its sources. Armistead's text includes informative material on the history, language and context of the Spanish in Louisiana. This book also includes the largest collection of recorded oral history in one text from the Islenos of St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, including decimas, corridos, romances, coplas, rhymes, riddles, proverbs, folktales and personal narratives. This text provides a collection of decimas in both Spanish and English; it provided the basis for my understanding of the decima not only as song, but as written text. Seeing the decima in text (having heard the decima many times), I am able to view the art form more critically. I am able to validate the decima as a true poetic form. Conversely, a reader experiences the decima out of context, without seeing the delivery of the event or audience response.

Gilbert C. Din's The Canary Islanders of Louisiana, is an exploration of the historical experience of the Canary Islanders in Louisiana over the past two hundred years. While this book mentions the decima, more importantly it gave me a historical viewpoint of the Isleno community and a picture of a Canary Islander's life in Louisiana (Din xii). John Lipski's The Language of the Islenos "seeks to update antecedent research, situate the St. Bernard Spanish dialect in a broader comparative perspective, and highlight the importance of this tiny enclave for broader linguistic and sociological issues" (Lipski ix). This text offers a linguistic approach

to Isleno Spanish, yet it also provided me with valuable historical information and research materials.

The second group of texts examines folklore and oral history using a performative approach in viewing oral traditions. They examine folklore and oral history as an art form, a means of expression. Each of these texts breaks down oral tradition into distinct components: composition, rehearsal, performance, performer, and audience. These texts break down the frames of oral tradition with the intention to analyze the art form as a performance event. The work of Richard Bauman lends a methodological perspective to this research in looking at the decimas as performance. His Verbal Art as Performance analyzes oral customs through “the understanding of performance as a mode of speaking” (Bauman 3). Using Bauman’s “keyings” and “emergent qualities” of performance, I was able to interpret the decimas as performance events.

Ruth Finnegan’s Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context will assist this study by fostering the notion of oral poetry as performance. She defines oral poetry as a performance that includes dynamics of stylistic devices, delivery by a performer and role of the audience. Finnegan’s comparative perspective allows for a broad range of oral poetry to be interpreted and understood.

Lastly, the third category of literature includes studies focusing specifically on performance of ethnography and the writing of performative research. They describe the process of staging and performing one’s own research, and the lessons and development that are a part of that process. These essays provide a framework for analyzing my own script and assist in the interpretation of critique and comment from the audience. Descriptions of the processes of

ethnographer, director and performer in these essays assisted me in my own reflection of the process of my progression in researching the decimas.

Shannon Jackson's "Ethnography and the Audition: Performance as Ideological Critique" "...documents an experiment in the performance of ethnography based on research collected in the audition process" (Jackson 21). This article explores the discovery process inherent in the performance of one's ethnographic research, that performance is a way of knowing. "With the help of my fellow performers I used an alternative means to represent 'the knowledge' gained from embodied interaction in the field about an embodied practice in the theater" (Jackson 34).

"The Self as Other: Creating the Role of Joni The Ethnographer for *Broken Circles*," by Joni Jones, investigates the role of performing ethnographer, and more specifically how that role enables the ethnographer to work through issues of "objectivity, the marginalizing of the self, and the appropriation of another culture" (Jones 131). This article enabled me to evaluate the roles played in my own research as community member, scholar and performer of the decimas.

An essay by Patricia Suchy, "A Complex Double Vision: The Motives Behind the Masks in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," describes the process of staging this novel for theatre production. It also "analyzes the masking and spectatorship in three key scenes of the adaptation" (Suchy 145). This article laid a foundation for me to organize the fourth chapter of the thesis. This chapter reflects Suchy's article in that it is a discussion of a performance (the show completed in the Black Box Theatre at Louisiana State University) about a performance (oral performance forms throughout *Invisible Man*).

I also utilized Gregory Ulmer's framework of the mystery in his Text Book: An Introduction to Literary Language and in Heuretics: The Logic of Invention to develop my own mystery performance. In addition Della Pollock's article "Performing Writing" provided the

“excursions” or elements of writing performatively which I used to analyze my poetry and prose selections in my script. Finally, the fourth chapter of this thesis discusses my performance, “A Tribute to Storyteller’s: Isleno Decima Singers of Louisiana,” and attempts to interpret and analyze the performance process so thereby more completely understanding the very subject of the performance the decima.

### **Methodology**

The approaches in researching the decimas for this study as thesis and as a scripted performance for stage are multidimensional, drawing from a wide range of disciplines. Each of the disciplines referred to in this study has its own unique perspective of oral traditions, performance and critical and scholarly writing. The method of analysis presented in this research is divided into three basic considerations of composing the study. First, I will provide a basis for the study by presenting a historical overview of Saint Bernard Parish, Louisiana. I will discuss the Spanish influence on Louisiana, including the settlements established in Saint Bernard Parish, which will be the focus of research in this study. I will discuss the oral traditions of the decima within the Isleno community along with the research that has been completed on the subject to date.

I will explore the decimas further using the work of Richard Bauman’s Verbal Art as Performance to “key” the verbal art form as performance. I will locate and describe the different elements that create the performance of the decimas. I resolve the use of descriptive information collected from interviews to discuss the spatial and temporal frames, as well as the roles of audience and performer within the performance event.

Second, the scripted text of the performance is presented using several forms of expression including narratives in verse, personal poetry and prose, and visual imagery. The

script reveals my motivation for being a simple storyteller of the community, the same motivation we find in the decimeros, composers of the decimas. Decimeros used storytelling as a form of discourse to maintain the survival of their history. As a performer, I used storytelling as a method of engaging my audience. As Brian Wallis states in the introduction to Blasted Allegories, “Storytelling necessitates an active, immediate, and communal bond between teller and listener” (Wallis xii). My storytelling in the Black Box Theatre parallels the use of storytelling in the decima within the Isleno culture by creating the participant/observer or performer/spectator relationship.

The motivation for the script was to express to the audience how vital it is to continue gaining knowledge from the decimas. “Storytelling then is a form through which her power can be expressed, power to maintain links with the past through the accurate and pleasure-giving repetition of the stories. But such tales deliver more than history and pleasure, for their plots are interlaced with both generalized experiences and ‘the wisdom of life,’ which both reflect on the contradictions of society and provide models for ethical and social conduct opposed to the dominant language of History or the Law” (Wallis xiv). Further, Wallis writes that “The relevance for the performative aspect of writing is clear in relation to the model of storytelling, for it reinforces the centrality of communality and it insists on making writing into a social act” (xvii). Through the composition and performance of the script, I was able to deliver a social text, engaging all involved (both members of my university community and my Isleno community) to respond as active observers of the event.

Finally, I will analyze and interpret the script of “A Tribute to Storytellers: Isleno Decima Singers of Louisiana.” This is accomplished using Patricia Suchy’s article “A Complex Double Vision: The Motives Behind the Masks in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.” I use this article as a

methodological approach in discussing three sections of my script which conferred interest in previous audience talk backs and critiques. Lastly Joni Jones' analysis provides the framework in which the performer can "move past the awkwardness of writing and turn to the intimacy of performance. In performance, the personalism of my moments has an established history in autobiographical performance and in performance art" (Jones 131-132).

By exposing the intent of the performative elements within the delivery presented, the aim is to view the performance as a way of knowing. Evaluating and critiquing choices made throughout the performance allows problems to be discussed as well as allowing me to gain a sense of what was successfully achieved through the performance of the decimas.

### **Significance**

The decimas are one of the last remaining forms of oral history still in practice in Saint Bernard Parish, Louisiana, yet they are fading away as a bygone tradition. There are fewer than a handful of people who still sing the decimas as a performance. One reason the decimas are disappearing is the loss of the Isleno language, which is only spoken and practiced by the elderly in the community. Another reason is that families have moved further inland than lower Saint Bernard Parish for economic reasons and security from the elements. They are no longer the non-literate members of an isolated community who need the decima to record their history.

The research that has been completed by historians, folklorists, linguists, and others concerning lower Saint Bernard Parish and its oral traditions has proved to be invaluable in preserving this rich heritage. However, further research can always benefit this dying art form. The decimas will now be interpreted as a "performance study," a performance about oral history, oral poetry, memory and the nature of recalling an event. As stated in Maida Owens' Swapping Stories: Folktales from Louisiana, "A basic principle in the study of folklore and anthropology is

that in order to understand a cultural feature, one must understand the context in which it exists. Therefore, to understand a basket, dance, song, ritual, or story, one must know about the maker, dancer, singer, practitioner, or teller. One must understand the culture or setting in which it is made or performed. Only then can one know its significance and function within the cultural region for the people” (xxviii). This research study takes a more progressive measure in understanding the significance and function of the decimas by actually practicing the art form. Through performance, this research will hopefully aid in situating the decimas and those who remember the performance event in history for all audiences to remember and learn from.

The informants for this research have given me great pleasure as I learn more about this art form and about the community of Lower Saint Bernard Parish. I feel as though I have acquired and will be sharing information and history that is not readily available anywhere else. These interviews carry stories, stories from their own personal lives that may not have been shared or written down in an everyday familial gathering.

The informants for this study are not only my neighbors (I am from St. Bernard Parish), they are also my family. My parents and grandfather shared with me important information throughout my research of the decimas. The other informants are close family friends who have remained bonded in this community for more than five generations.

One of the last “old time” decimeros of the Isleno community was Joseph “Chelito” Campo. Chelito Campo was a celebrated folk artist whose language and history have been recorded and preserved by researchers for more than twenty years. His art of storytelling included riddles, proverbs, folktales and decimas. I had the privilege of interviewing Chelito Campo about the decimas for a folklore class as an undergraduate. The last time I heard Chelito Campo sing his decimas was at the celebration of his one-hundredth birthday. Joseph “Chelito”



Campo was not only one of the most celebrated folk artists of the Isleno community, but he was also my great great uncle.

This research study is quite different from an argumentative study in that it looks at research textually. As Gregory Ulmer explains, “to do textual research is to write from the position or experience of the affected reader. A research paper as text, then is a kind of autobiography, in that the purpose of the research is to explore and discover one’s own (the reader’s) relationship to the traditions, institutions, and discourses that have provided the contexts and tools the reader uses to understand not just a given work, but the self, the world, and everything in the world” (275). This research study is not only a thesis for me, nor just a scripted performance for an audience, but also a continuation of the celebration and preservation of this community. It is a community that represents who I am as a researcher, writer, performer and person. It is my historical community opened to audiences who want to learn from the past and endeavor to teach in the present. By adding this research and performance to the accumulation of studies done in the past, I hope to interest others in studying or appreciating this art form of the Isleno community. It is an art form that lends itself to multiple viewpoints and perspectives able to reach audiences across disciplines and interests.

## Chapter Two: Historical Overview

St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, is located on the east embankment of the Mississippi River, stretching four to thirty-five miles southeast of New Orleans. The State of Louisiana, once governed and controlled by the Spanish, was once a part of East Texas and considered an expansion of Mexico during the late eighteenth century. During this time, certain Louisiana territories were colonized with Spanish settlers. The Spanish governor of Louisiana, Bernardo de Galvez, supplied settlers for the Louisiana territories, one being St. Bernard Parish, by drawing on a group of Hispanic pioneers from the Canary Islands.

The Canary Islanders arrived in Louisiana in 1778 and colonized several small villages. In St. Bernard Parish, the majority of Spanish colonists settled in the communities of Shell Beach, Reggio, Ycloskey, Poydras, and Delacroix Island. The settlers of these strategic regions are known as Islenos, “islanders,” a term that refers to their historical beginnings in the Canary Islands. Each of these small villages was Spanish speaking, and each community possessed its own particular Spanish dialect. These dialects have remained distinct now for over two hundred years due to the isolation of these rural areas, and the separation from New Orleans urbanization.

The settlers of these villages, which were strategically placed along the Mississippi River, relied heavily on the ecology of the Delta as a source of food as well as income. The Islenos lifestyle focused on the Mississippi River. It was here that the Isleno communities lived and worked season by season. “Historically the Islenos have held such occupations, depending on the season, as muskrat trappers, fisherman, crabbers, oystermen, alligator hunters, and shrimp trawlers. In earlier times, Islenos gathered moss, hunted for duck, and raised oxen” (Armistead 4). The Isleno way of life depended on the water. Even in the off-season, there were a few

Islenos who would truck farm grown goods, but due to the terrible conditions of roadways, the farmers transported their produce by way of water through the New Orleans port.

In Din Gilbert's historical tracking of the Isleno people, The Canary Islanders of Louisiana, he quotes an editor of the New Orleans *Weekly Picayune*, who traveled down to St. Bernard Parish and encountered the Isleno people. This editor makes an endnote in his essay about the character of the Islenos by stating that they "were a happy although unenlightened people, who cherished social virtues and shared their good fortune with their neighbors" (Din 98). Because of the rigorous lifestyle of the Islenos, mostly living below what we think of today as poverty level, these people lived "hand to mouth." Even today, many of the Isleno people are hard working laborers who look toward the land and water for survival. This is one of the main reasons for the enduring lack of literacy in these villages. It was not until after the Civil War that formal education was introduced to these few villages. After the War, a large number of the Islenos remained nonliterate because formal education did not supply these people with knowledge that could be used in their marshland occupations.

Hence, the Isleno oral traditions have survived for over two hundred years. History, tradition, and culture of the Isleno communities have been passed down orally, and these communities have maintained a consistent dialect from village to village with remarkable durability. Since the middle of the twentieth century, the oral traditions of the Islenos of St. Bernard Parish have been recorded and preserved by many linguists, anthropologists, historians, and ethnographers. Oral traditions of the Isleno folk that have been recorded and preserved include personal narratives, folktales, proverbs, riddles, ballads, popularized songs, lyric songs and, most famously, decimas.

Decimas are local narrative songs composed by Isleno singers within the communities of St. Bernard Parish. The Louisiana decimas are locally inspired and invented, and they are commonly composed in couplet form, with rhymes in even verses, and consist of ten to twelve stanzas. Some of the decimas of Louisiana have been traced historically back to areas of Spain in the 1400s (Perez). It is believed that settlers from Spain brought the decimas to the Canary Islands, and then from the Canary Islands to Louisiana in the 1700s. According to Irvan Perez, decimas that are considered “historical” are those that can be traced back to the Canary Islands and Spain, and there has been a conscious effort by decima singers such as Perez to preserve them. However, decimas that were invented through and during more recent local events were not so carefully passed on through the generations. Perez claims that at one point in his life, he believes there were over three hundred “historical” decimas still extant. Today, the number has dwindled to twenty-four. These decimas have all been recorded in written texts and in audio documentation such as in the recording “Spanish Decimas from St. Bernard Parish” sung by Irvan Perez and in Armistead’s The Spanish Tradition in Louisiana. The decimas of the Isleno folk tell of, or comment on, local events, happenings, and individual lives within the community. Decimas can be personal narratives as well as impersonal narratives; that is, the singer of the narrative may speak in first-person about events in which he has participated, or he may speak in third-person about events he has observed. The decimas often served as a source for conveying community news or gossip. Community members refer to the decima as their “local newspapers,” informing others of the events which occurred earlier that day (Perez and Alfonso).

Decimas generally comment on the Isleno culture in a good-natured manner. Armistead notes that the songs generally focus on four distinct topics or themes: “events pertaining to local history; humorous, ironic commentary on the rigors and hazards of local occupations; muskrat

trapping, shrimp trawling, and crab fishing, for example; satirical poems about foibles and misadventures of local individuals; and tall tales concerning fabulous fishing exploits, gigantic crabs, enormous catfish, and gargantuan schools of shrimp” (Armistead 13). Many of the decimas are humorous in nature, telling of individuals’ mishaps or misfortunes in an ironic or gently satirical manner. For example Irvan Perez tells of the decima “Ford de Papiel” where a gentleman’s rag tag Ford, patched with cardboard and wooden boxes is so full of holes that his father-in-law falls through the floor after hitting an especially big bump.

It is important to note thus far the obvious close relations of these individual communities. It was the intimate family and communal relationships that nurtured the use of decimas that were commonly recited during the long hours spent together. The Isleno folk not only worked together, but they also often lived their entire lives together in the communities of their birth. As Walter Ong explains in Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, “Because in its physical constitution as sound, the spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors, as persons, the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups” (74). Spatially, these people were constantly involved with and aware of each other, therefore they were not only hard working laborers, but also sociable people.

The decimas of the Isleno people were sung and performed at different occasions. In Ruth Finnegan’s Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context, she states, “a piece of oral literature, to reach its full actualization, must be performed. The text alone cannot constitute the oral poem. One needs to remember the circumstances of the performance of a piece--this is not a secondary or peripheral matter, but integral to the identity of the poem as actually realized” (Finnegan 28). Decimas were sung to pass the time while fishing on boats or trapping in the

marshlands; however, these songs were also performed at special events. Historically, decimas have been performed at weddings, the Blessings of Fleets, Christmas, the celebration of the New Year, Carnival or Mardi Gras, the christening of a child in the community, birthdays, feasts, or other social events such as dances. Today, decimas are sung for similar celebratory events such as the Fiesta de la Conception honoring the Blessed Mother, the opening of new museums, at nursing homes in St. Bernard Parish, at festivals around Louisiana, and for educational purposes. Viewing the decimas as elements in the cultural performances of the Islenos helps us understand why they have thrived throughout the community's history, or as Bauman states "Cultural performances tend to be the most prominent performance contexts within a community. They are, as a rule, scheduled events, restricted in setting, clearly bounded, and widely public, involving the most highly formalized performance forms and accomplished performers of the community" (28). The decima created a more elaborate and attractive experience intended for the community. Din explains further: "On special occasions in St. Bernard Parish, decimas, a form a folk poetry, were sung to commemorate an event or person. It was considered an honor to have a decima mention someone, even if in a negative way" (200).

Decimas are performed at the above-mentioned events in such a way that the decima becomes the event. As Walter Ong points out, to some extent, "[t]he spoken word is always an event, a moment in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word" (75). But community members also recognize the event-ness of the decima by conflating the songs with the occasions in which the songs were sung. Likewise, a given social event is frequently recalled or explained by articulating accounts using the decima to assist in the retelling of that happening. Through the accounts of members of the community, singers of the decimas as well as participants of the events where the decimas were sung recall the event

through remembering the decimas. The decima becomes the event, and the event becomes the decima. For example when asking an Isleno “what is a decima” the explanation always begins with a description of an event where a decima was sung, mixing the decima and the event, such as a wedding, without distinguishing between the two.

John Holmes McDowell explains a similar phenomenon with respect to the corrido, a Mexican and Mexican American ballad form that also features a historical narrative and is sung as part of an event (McDowell 46). “The corrido presupposes a performance setting lodged within a larger framework of interactional roles and strategies, social occasions, and cultural norms and values. As performances, corridos entail: performers, embarked on a display of communicative competence; audiences attending to these displays with a critical ear; and a set of rules or expectations regulating the proper fulfillment of these interdependent roles” (70-71). In a similar vein, performances of the decimas involve the performers as well as the observers or audience members in a rich social event. As Richard Bauman argues, “We view the act of performance as situated behavior, situated within and rendered meaningful with reference to relevant contexts. Such contexts may be identified at a variety of levels--in terms of settings, for example, the culturally defined places where performance occurs” (27).

According Bauman, communities will structure a set of communicative means in a culture specific way in order to “key” or frame the event so as to permit the community to understand a performance. As Bauman notes, the use of certain verbal or nonverbal cues in a performer’s delivery (such as parallelism, special paralinguistic features, special formulae, and appeals to tradition) are used to “fix the attention of the audience more strongly on the performer, bind the audience to the performer in a relationship of dependence that keeps them caught up in his display. A significant part of the capacity of performance to transform social

structure resides in the power that the performer derives from the control over his audience afforded him by the formal appeal of his performance” (16).

In keying the performance of the decima parallelism assists in cuing the function of the form directed to the audience. Parallelism “involves the repetition, with systematic variation, of phonic, grammatical, semantic, or prosodic structures in the construction of an utterance” (Bauman 18). Decimas involve parallelism in that as a poetic structure of local narratives they present a repetition in the verses, the refrain and the titles of the songs. Decimas such as “Welfare Work” and “Seventeen Seventy-Eight” demonstrate the importance of such criteria in the form.

*Welfare Work*

O lilola! I just don't much care!  
The work you do on welfare  
Is too dangerous for me:  
Poor little Titico  
Got a thorn in his foot!  
O lilola! I just don't much care!

Using the repetition of phonetic and grammatical elements in the Isleno language, the performer is able to compose a decima that is ten to twelve stanzas of rhyming couplets. This form provides the audience a key to recognize the decima as a performance. “The capacity of parallelism to extend from brief passing utterances to lengthy and elaborate poetic forms is an important factor, because it gives us a clue to potential continuities between elaborate, scheduled, public performances, involving highly marked performance forms, and other contexts for discourse in which performance may be more fleeting and transitory” (Bauman 19).

Special paralinguistic features involving the performances are unfortunately not captured in the published versions of the decimas. The decimas are published in a poetic form allowing the reader to recognize the beginning and end of each stanza and verse. It is worth noting that



the decimeros use rather traditional techniques in performing the decimas. The vocal varieties in the performance of a decima differ due to the emotional charge of the language presented to the audience. The range of paralinguistic variety in the performance will vary depending on whether the decima is humorous, ironic, serious, or satirical in nature. The vocal qualities used in a performance such as tone, rate, pitch and pausing will vary depending on the emotional content of the decima. The physical delivery of the decimas is also worth noting. In my observations as a community member and as an ethnographer, I have noticed a pattern in the corporeal performance of the decimas. The decimeros almost always stand erect in front of their audience to perform. Exceptions to this norm would include those who are physically bound to a wheelchair or sitting at a table while simultaneously accomplishing other tasks, such as peeling fruit or carving wood. Before performing, the decimero clears his throat and inhales before delivering the first utterance. The head is usually slightly angled upward so as to elongate the neck, and the eyes are closed. The only significant movement from the performer other than the mouth is the movement of his hands. This occurs before and during the utterance of the decima by the performer keeping his arms at his sides and maintaining the beat or rhythm by tapping his thighs. Both hands tap each thigh in a double or syncopated rhythm, thereby simultaneously maintaining two different beats in one decima. Occasionally, a decimero may also tap a foot, however it is not as frequently seen as the tapping of the thighs. These movements continue throughout the performance of the decima. At the conclusion of the performance, the decimero returns to a neutral position before the audience. Through the paralinguistic and physical features of the performance, the audience is able to recognize “what is important is the contrast between performance and other ways of speaking in the informant’s community” (Bauman 20).

Special formulae are also an important aspect of verbal art because the formula facilitates the audience's recognition of the kind of performance presented to them. They are able to recognize the difference between a joke, a riddle, a myth or a decima. "Such formulae are, in effect, markers of specific genres, and insofar as these genres are conventionally performed in a community, the formulae may serve as keys to performance" (Bauman 21). The formula is quite specific for the composition and performance of the decima. The decima is a local narrative song consisting of ten to twelve stanzas rhyming in couplets and embodying themes of humor, sarcasm, irony, commentary on local events and working life as well as personal inspiration. The structure of the decima follows a marked outline where the first few stanzas lay out the setting, the time of day, and the persons involved in the decima. By the middle to end of the decima, the punch line or point of the story is complete, leaving elaboration and repetition of verse to remain. The decima in content is very specific to the community and the native land of the Isleno people. Several decimas included jokes that were culture specific to the community. Only a community member could fully appreciate the relevance of the joke or the events and characters that inspired it.

A final key to the performance of the decima is the appeal to tradition. Bauman points out that in most oral verbal arts; "There are esthetic standards brought to bear here, having to do with the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression itself, but there may also be an appeal to tradition, the acceptance of past practice as a standard of reference. In tradition-oriented societies, an appeal to tradition may thus become a key to performance, a way of signaling the assumption of responsibility for the proper doing of a communicative act" (21). Traditional practices in the Isleno community such as the decima are not easily acquired. There is a reasonable amount of training that goes into becoming a decima singer. In interviews,

community members have expressed their openness to the tradition of the decima, mentioning that anyone could sing a decima provided that there were reasons behind the composing and singing of the decima. Mishaps occurring in everyday life or a desire to poke fun at another or oneself would supply enough of a rationale for someone to compose a decima. However, most singers learned how to compose and perform this traditional poetic form through an informal apprenticeship to family members: grandfathers, fathers, uncles and aunts who taught the decimas to the next generation. Today, all the remaining singers of the community learned the decimas from family members. Members of the community usually mention the Perez family as the most prolific composers and performers of decimas. As Bauman notes, “the role of performer and the behavior associated with it may dominate or be subordinate to the other roles he may play” (31). Today, the Perez family is identified with the decima, and vice-versa, and the family has earned a reputation as the historians of the Isleno community due to their efforts in preserving and passing on its oral history in the decimas and other forms.

In discussing the way in which the performance of the decima is keyed to the audience, I would also like to mention the importance of the events in which the decimas occurred. As stated earlier, the informants for this ethnographic study described the decimas using happenings, occurrences and events to answer questions concerning the decima. In my observations the decima is not just a song; it is a cultural marker of the Isleno community to identify the event of the decima as a unique and specific tradition. The structure of performance events is a product of the interplay of many factors, including setting, act sequence, and ground rules of performance (Bauman 28).

Decimas were sung and performed at several celebrations including holidays, weddings, birthdays, christenings and weekend festivities. Holidays include Christmas, Thanksgiving,

Easter, New Year's and Mardi Gras. Members of the Saint Bernard community have reported the decimas being sung at these holidays after the more widely recognized customs characteristic of the celebration have been performed. Gathering with family and friends would start the event. Then the preparation of food and drinks would follow. Subsequently, the meal is prepared and served, followed by after dinner drinks consumed by the adults and elders in the group. Later on in the day as the group would wind down and the sun began to set, the decima singers would begin their performances.

A weekend celebration such as a dance or a Blessing of the Fleet would follow a similar pattern. Community members would gather, eat and dance, and enjoy the decima performance as the pinnacle of the festivities. The decimas capped off the party. They were in essence the grand finale of public performance within the community's cultural performances. They were the fireworks of the occasion. Though the performance of the decima singing was much anticipated at these celebrations, it was not an extraordinary event. The decimas were very much a part of the Isleno tradition; it was a common, unremarkable occurrence in the community. It was general knowledge the decimas were to be sung at these proceedings.

The decimas were usually sung by the same small group of men (and occasionally elder women) in the community. "Eligibility for and recruitment to performance roles vary cross culturally in interesting ways. One dimension along which this variation occurs has to do with conceptions of nature of the competence required of a performer and the way such competence is acquired" (Bauman 30). Once the decima is practiced in the home, the young man is invited by other family members to sing at a social event such as at a wedding or dance. If sung successfully, that first public display of performance initiates that member as a competent decimero of the community.

The decimas were sung for both holidays and weekend festivities in the late afternoon. If they were not sung in the home for a holiday, the decimas were sung by a group of men who would visit the community members by walking and greeting door to door while singing the decimas. Members of the community describe this happening as “touring the Island.” Today this would resemble the Christmas tradition of caroling. It is also reminiscent of visiting friends and family members during the holidays. The men who sang the decimas were friends and family who practiced and rehearsed the songs together. Rehearsal took place for the scheduled events of holidays, making the decimas during these events highly stylized and structured. There was a list of decimas to be sung and assigned duties as to who led each song according to Perez.

Weekend festivities such as the gathering at dance halls would be structured in a similar manner. The dance halls were equipped with a room for eating meals such as chicken and sausage or seafood gumbo. The members of the community would bring their entire families to the dances to eat and celebrate the weekend. After the meal everyone congregated in the dance room where music was played by artists from New Orleans. Members of the community have reported dancing to the music of Oscar “Papa” Celestin, Louis Armstrong, and Fats Domino. Later in the night when the musicians left the hall, the community members would begin to sing the decimas. The children and the young women of the community would be escorted out of the room to begin the performance of the decimas that were “inappropriate” or “unsuitable” in content. It was a form of entertainment as well as local news reports of what had happened in everyday life during that week of work. While decimas were highly structured and rehearsed by those who initiated the singing, they were also open, allowing the community to chime in when the desire to sing arose. Informants reported that at some points in the night, a round robin effect would occur where an impromptu decima composition would occur at the dance. This is an

example of an unscripted performance or chance performance of the community. It has also been reported that elderly women would have the opportunity to sing at this type of venue. The audience was a dynamic participant in the performance, and sometimes audience members became performers themselves. “The ready-madeness of the formulas makes possible the fluency required under performance conditions, while the flexibility of the form allows the singer to adapt his performance to the situation and the audience, making it longer and more elaborate, or shorter and less adorned, as audience response, his own mood, and time constraints may dictate. And of course, the poetic skill of the singer is a factor in how strongly he can attract and hold the attention of the audience, how sensitively he can adapt to their mood, and how elaborate he can make his song if conditions allow” (Bauman 39). As Irvan Perez states audience members who became performers would compete in composing impromptu verses. So, we see an interesting mix of both a ready made and free form performance.

Decimas performed at weddings and christenings served the purpose to commemorate new beginnings in the community. The decimas sung at these events were fairly formal. The singer would arrive at the site and give his regards to the family, his regards being the decimas. They were more traditional in nature, the decimas everyone could listen to. These are the decimas that remain in existence today. They served as a greeting card or an appropriate toast to the family rejoicing in their life event. “There is however, a distinctive potential in performance by its very nature which has implications for the creation of social structure in performance. It is part of the essence of performance that it offers to the participants a special enhancement of experience, bringing with it a heightened intensity of communicative interaction which binds the audience to the performer in a way that is specific to performance as a mode of communication. Through his performance, the performer elicits the participative attention and energy of his

audience, and to the extent that they value his performance, they will allow themselves to be caught up in it” (Bauman 43). The decima served as a connection, a thread sewn in the community to bind the society together. It was during these occasions that the community members expressed their cultural connection with one another.

Formal stylized events were not the only occasions when decimas were performed. Because the decimas very much reflect the working lives of the Isleno people, the decimas are reflexive of their origins of composition. Through interviews, members of the community have revealed the foundation or formulation of songs taking place during periods spent in their occupations. As fisherman, shrimpers, trawlers, trappers, hunters and farmers the Isleno people used their moments at work to generate decimas to later share with the community. Informants have explained the act of composing a decima as something to occupy the mind. The professions of the community allowed freedom amid manual labor to compose and rehearse a decima. For example, Ken Sears, a shrimp fisherman in his youth, described a trip on the water and stated that the job is a quiet one. Depending on the season and area of catch, a boat and crew could be out on the water for up to two weeks as long as supplies were stocked for the duration. There is not much to talk about when the crew knows each other so well, therefore permitting time for the decimas. As Irvan Perez stated, when the crew is asleep, the person at the wheel would pass the time composing songs. Decimas were sung in solitude while all others on the boat rested up for their turn to steer. Decimas were composed during this time by recalling conversations, interaction, situations and misfortunes that occurred on the boat earlier in the day. The act of laborious work assisted in the formulation of the decima, therefore several decimas are in existence that document that labor in the content of the songs. “As interesting as cultural performances are, performance occurs outside of them as well, and the most challenging job that

faces the student of performance is establishing the continuity between the noticeable and public performances of cultural performances, and the spontaneous, unscheduled, optional performance contexts of everyday life” (Bauman 28). Whether on the water or in the marshlands, the physical toil of the Islenos granted an alternative performance venue while backstage out of the public’s eye. Decimas functioned as an outlet for the peoples’ hardships during employment. The decima highlighted the lifestyle of the Isleno people reflecting both work and social activity. The performance of the decima frames the close contact of these communities; the decima utilized the verbal art to mark the culture of the community therefore making the decima the event and the event the decima.

My interpretation of the decimas is that it is an identifier of the culture. When asking the community members about their past, they speak of the decimas. The decimas tell the story of what used to be. The decimas carry the historical background of place, events and people. All elements of life are represented. A decima is recalled to explain a certain moment in their lives. Decimas are used as metaphors, as anecdotes and endnotes in conversation today. They are the community’s touchstone to its history.

In the interview process, interviewees were asked specific questions concerning the decimas. For instance, “Do you recall a time when you sang a decima, or have heard a decima being sung?” In responding to this question, interviewees elaborated in great depth answering the question, as well as including detailed specifics about their own personal lives. As in everyday conversation, the responses went in many directions. Self-disclosure was an integral part of the interviews. The interviewees spoke of the decimas as a constituent of their personal lives.



In discussing their personal lives, they also conversed about the land's association with their daily lives. Through work and social activity, the land and water of the geographical location were characterized as fundamental to their society. People were hunters, trappers, farmers and fisherman. People did not use cars; rather they walked down the road always with other community members by their side. People celebrated events in front yards, on back porches, on the water. The agricultural wetlands supplied a wealth of necessities to the members of this community, and their attachment to the land is echoed in the interviews as well as in the decimas. The land was the focal point of their everyday lives.

In the interviews, community members reiterated analogous phrases concerning the importance of memory and remembering what used to be. The idea of memory is reinforced to stress the fact that the culture and society of the Isleno community are fading out. The remaining Spanish speakers of the Canary Island descendents in St. Bernard Parish are all over the age of fifty. Most of the informants for this study were over the age of seventy. The act of recalling or remembering the past is vital to the history of the community because of the changes that have transpired within the last fifty years. To begin, there are few Spanish speakers remaining in the community. As urbanization arose and jobs were offered in the metropolis of New Orleans, community members fled to other cities, therefore expanding their families with outside cultures and influences. If an Isleno man or women did not marry a fellow Isleno, it was very rare that the language and culture were passed on to the children in that family.

The occupations of the Isleno people changed as well. With the expansion of New Orleans, new jobs arose as well for the Isleno community. Laborers of the land and water became carpenters and craftsmen, building the Crescent City into what it is today. Few still occupy the water as fishermen, yet the majority of movement in Delacroix Island comes from

those who use the location as a sporting site for leisure activity. The remaining Islenos in the area refer to these outsiders as “sports” or “chivos.”

The central social events of the past have diminished as well. There are no longer dance halls operating in the area. The practice of “touring the island” during the holidays is no longer performed because most of the residents have moved from Delacroix Island to higher ground and because there are so few people who can sing or understand the Spanish language songs. Although communal rituals such as weddings, christenings, and outdoor parties are still practiced, the decimas no longer are constitutive of such events as they once were.

The remaining festivities where decimas are sung include Louisiana festivals, museum occasions, decima nights and individual performances. “The emergent structure of performance events is of special interest under conditions of change, as participants adapt established patterns of performance to new circumstances” (Bauman 42). Festivals such as the Louisiana Jazz and Heritage Festival and the New Orleans French Quarter Festival host the cultural societies of the area, including the Isleno Cultural Society and the Canary Island Descendants Association. Both societies hold active members who sing the decimas at such festivals and at museum functions.

The decimas are sung individually by the remaining singers, decimeros who still practice the art of composition and performance. This occurs in front of family members or anyone who is interested in the songs. Individuals visit elementary and high schools teaching the younger community the importance of the history of Isleno culture. They also frequent retirement communities where the decimas can be performed for an audience that remembers the songs sung long ago. Researchers interested in the culture, the language and the performance of the decimas are also welcome to participate as audience members and respondents to the event.

In the present time it is through performance that the tradition of the decima is still passed on to others. The decimas are performed at the above-mentioned events; they are not presented as text or spoken as literature. Rather they are performed as an art form indigenous to the community. It is the performance of the decima that remains a constant custom. The events of the decima may have altered, changed in form, but the practice of composition and performance remains the same. It is this custom that keeps the oral history alive in Saint Bernard Parish. Performance of verbal art, the decima, permits new members of the community and all who are interested in the history of the Islenos a way to better understand what used to be, what is remembered by those who can recall their youth and times past.

### **Chapter Three: “A Tribute to Storytellers: Isleno Decima Singers of Louisiana”**

This chapter is devoted to the presentation of the script, “A Tribute to Storytellers: Isleno Decima Singers of Louisiana.” This script was originally performed at Louisiana State University in the HopKins Black Box Theatre on March 16, 2000 at 7:30 p.m. The one hour show ran for three nights, ending on March 18, 2000. I wrote, directed and performed the one person show.

I collected and composed the natural narratives, prose pieces and poetry presented in the script while researching the decima. The sources of the natural narratives were the responses of four interviewees recorded during the ethnographic fieldwork for this study. I gathered the prose pieces included in the script from newspaper articles, personal experience and memory. Finally, I included poetry composed to reflect the structure, content and delivery of the decima. All forms of text within this script are organized using a collage style format with transitions between each frame.

I have included the ground plan for the performance within the script. The ground plan is situated for a proscenium stage with three divisions of audience risers and two main aisles. The upstage area is framed with three flats in a loose semicircle facing the audience. A chair is placed in front of the center flat and a table is situated in front of the left stage flat. A pile of soil is arranged down stage right between the right and center flats. The “x” in the ground plan represents the actor’s movement throughout the script.

The props include a pitcher of water, a basket of ten rocks and a large bowl, all which were placed on the linen covered table left of the stage. The costume consisted of a black t-shirt and black knee length skirt. A muted blue sweater was worn over the black shirt and the sleeves

were pulled up. No shoes or socks were worn and my hair was tightly pulled back into a bun. Within the script, stage directions are included in brackets and in bold face to document the performer's movement, light and sound cues, and progression of the performance.

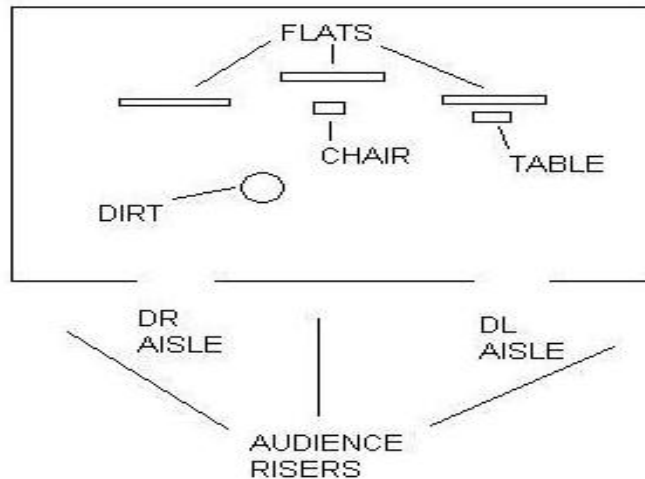


Figure 1. Basic Ground Plan

The natural narratives are transcribed using a verse structure resembling poetry rather than prose. The use of such a style assists in representing in print both the verbal and nonverbal performative elements of a spoken presentation. This free verse technique allows the accenting of separate components of sound, meaning, terminology and breath. Another feature of the poetic style is the employment of diacritical marks to symbolize the delivery of verbal and nonverbal cues. The symbols within the narratives highlight features of the spoken word, such as an interviewee stating, “If you can direct me on what you would like next? Uh, okay. My name is Helen Morales Alfonso.” I include underlining to indicate the stressing of a word, colons to designate the stretching of sound, ellipses to show pausing and a period before “h’s” to signify audible inhaling, as shown below.

If you would direct me on what you would like next  
Uh::huh...  
Okay .hh  
My name is Helen Morales Alfonso

(See appendix for a complete list of typographical symbols used in the script.)

The poetic style of transcription reflects the natural flow of conversational dialogue creating for the reader a visualization of sentence fragmentation within everyday discourse. This written image of discourse on the page creates an artistic perspective to view and understand the spoken word. This script is a representation of my fieldwork and literary research into the decimas. “Innovations in writing practices may be one way to represent lived experience; however, using performance and performers’ abilities to represent fieldwork gives that lived experience a multi-sensuality and immediacy difficult to reproduce on the page. Furthermore, adopting the form of the script in lieu of or as a supplement to the essay allows the ethnographer to evoke the multi-vocality of the research” (Jackson 41). Like Jackson, it is a performance that transforms my scholarly research into a participatory experience where I become part of the study as well.

Actual Script

**A Tribute to Storytellers:  
Isleno Decima Singers of Louisiana  
Written and Performed by  
Danielle Sears**

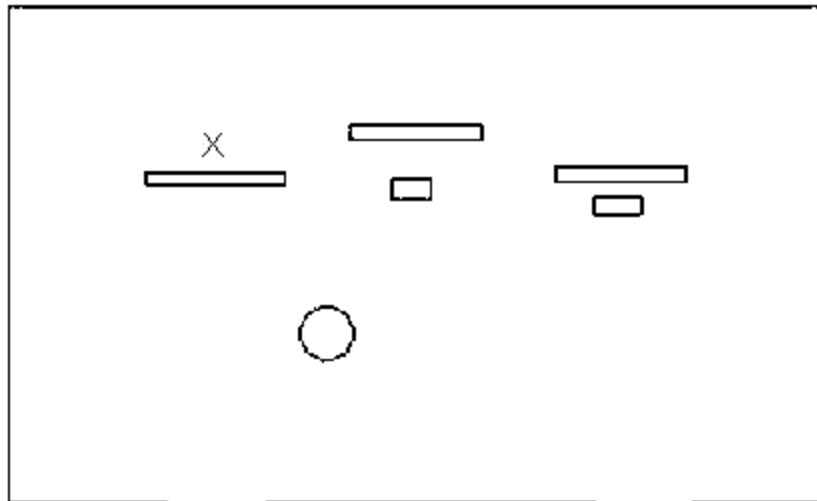


Figure 2. Stage Direction #1

**[Stand behind flat and find voice by clearing throat. Hesitate, then with uncertainty sing first verse of song.]**

**[Sing:]**

Sitting on the gallery

Sitting on the gallery

**[Lights dim up to expose gaps between flats.]**

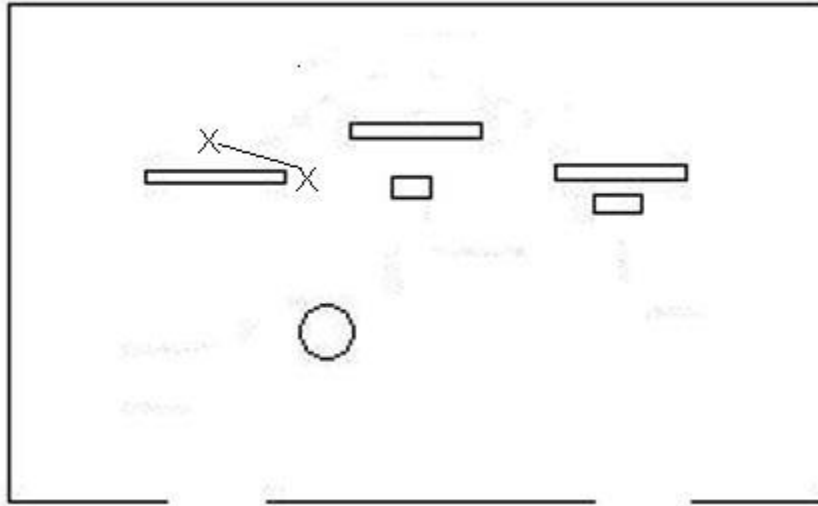


Figure 3. Stage Direction #2

**[Peek out from behind flats while delivering prose and staring at the pile of dirt.]**

She stands in the doorway view with her nightgown on. Her arms, her chest, her lower calves exposed to the dim light from the night lamp on the dresser. I am so still. I don't want her to know that I am looking at her. Watching her. She raises her once sturdy bones above her head to remove the pins from her hair. She wore braids on either side of her round sun dried face. I can't wait to see her let it fall down. Let it all fall down out of the knots and twists that I am so familiar with. And, slowly, it happens. The snow and graphite colored strands are released, let loose from the ties that bind them. The thin wiry strands of snow and graphite fall down to her lower back. With her back to the doorway, she is completely transformed from someone sacred, mournful, historical and loved to someone like me, loose, free, comfortable, present and loved. She sits on the crocheted coverlet knitted out of multi-hued yarn that she made especially for her *mijas*. She is so beautiful, so not like anything I have ever seen before. I don't want to stop looking. [*While stepping back:*] I take a few steps back from the doorway



and use my voice to let her know that [*Shouting:*] “I am ready for bed!” And ask her if she is too.

**[Lights come up with a general wash in stage area]**

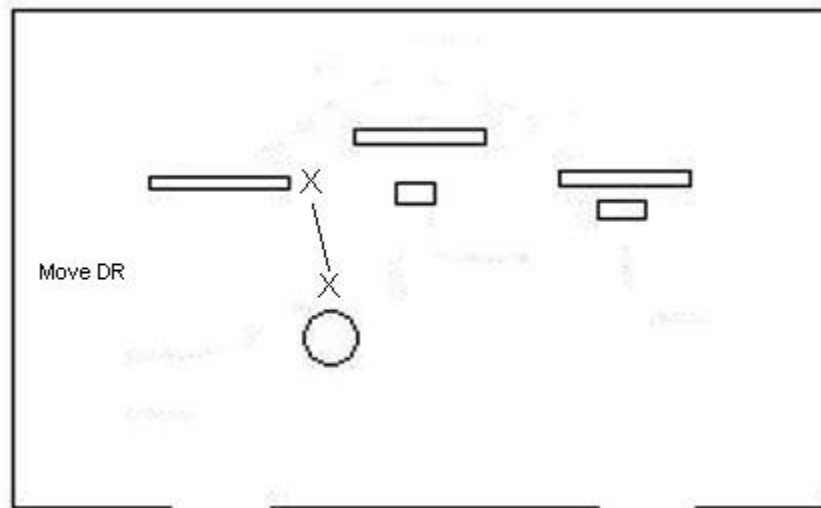


Figure 4. Stage Direction #3

**[Step from flats to downstage pile of dirt. While delivering poetry, push dirt out down stage left. Sort it out in an oblong shape while using netting movements and rehearsing song. When finished with verses, freeze movement into netting image.]**

What once was

Is still.

Just another.

Here

Today

Right now.

Tomorrow.

**[Sing:]**

Sitting on the gallery

Sitting on the gallery

Sun sets over the bayou

**[Stand up from kneeling position, downstage right. Cross downstage over dirt dust hands and address audience with question.]**

So, what is a decima?

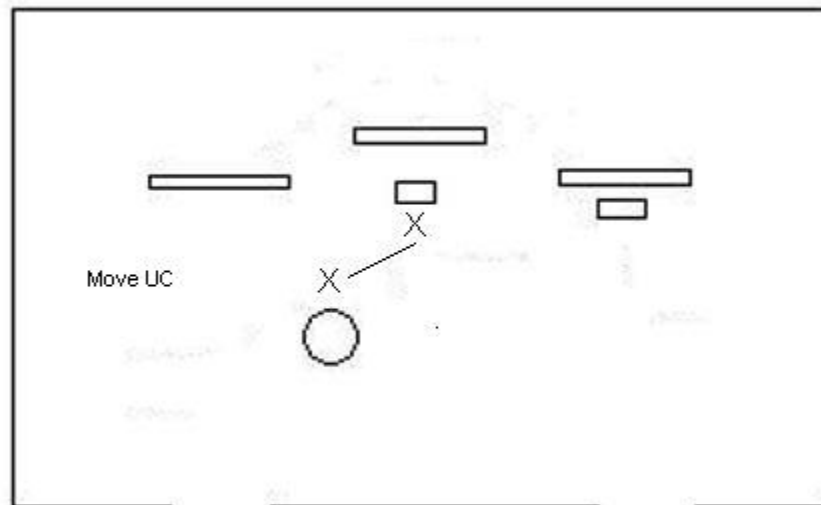


Figure 5. Stage Direction #4

**[Step backward to center stage chair and sit. Slouch down in chair with feet out and arms crossed.]**

Anthony Campo:

.hhh

I:: rememba as a young boy getting ready for the dances hhh

Mama would dress me

And sit me down hhh

Mama would put her nice dress on .hh

Her only nice dress on

And she had nice shoes too hhh

.Hhh but hah hah she had the worst time with her sh(h)oes...

Well..

.Hh she always wore boots..

Slip-ons

Her foot was wide ya know hhh

She worked her flat feet ya know .hhh

So she had to squeeze her foot into the narrow shoe hhh

.Hh And o(h)h she got it to fit but Ieyei(h) yei hhh

When .hh the dance was over ((shakes head)) she suffered with her fe(h)et hah hhh

We.hhll...

The dance hh would last days two...

Or three if that?

.Hh So on our way out the house?

.Hh She made me grab my pillo- hhh

She made me a little baby pillo- ya know? .hh

For my head...

A:::nd we go to the dance hhh ...

.Hh we eat gumbo a:::nd whatever the ladies cooked

A:::nd den I would go find myself a bench. hhh

Yeah? along the wall ya know? .hh

And prop myself there with my my pillo- ya know.

I .hh would scooch myself under everyone's coats for my covers see...

Oh .hh yeah she would dance and dance and dance and dance...

Oh all kinds...

.Hh a::h Jitterbug...

Dat kind

.Hh when I was an older boy

I used to go outside with the other bad boys ya' know

And fight...

.Hh Yeah

We would fight it out

See..

Who was the biggest...

.Hh the strongest...

We would do dat all night?

Well...

They had older boys and men out too .hh

A::nd they had paid musicians there

Like the black man who plays the piano

W.hhhat's his name?... hhh

O::r the one who played the horn?... .hhh

Yeah that's him

Yeah they would come from Naw Awlins and play

I::I guess before they were were famous... .hhh

A::nd no one wanted them to stop hhh

So they would start to pack up .hhh

And we would be waiting for them outside

Say "You better get back in dere and play some more?"

And yeah people would pay them more money too. .... .hh

A::nd the people would sing their decimas... hhh

After the band

They would sing...

.Hh and play dere own instruments

Sometimes late at night hhh

**[Quick switch of body position to legs crossed right over left leaning upper body stage left with left arm on back of chair and right arm rested in lap.]**

Helen Morales Alfonso:

I::ve heard them all my life

They sang them all my life

A::nd well u:h my sister married Mr. Paul Perez's son Allen?

And he...

Paul Perez ..

Put together quite a few of those decimas

And now Alan sings them for the Canary Island Descendants now?

Well?...

I've heard quite a few of them.

But I don't remember them.

I never really did learn them.

A::nd there was Uncle Chelito?

He was alw(h)ays with his decimas

And uh::uh his stories? and storytellin uh

He had a lot of knowledge about the Islenos

A::nd uh...

If you would direct me on what you would like next

Uh::huh...

Okay .hh

My name is Helen Morales Alfonso

I'm from Delacroix Island...

.Hhh lived there all my life

I only left the Island for a few months when my husband worked in the oilfield

And then I came back?

A:::nd have been there ever s(h)ince hah hah

Ye::s I do...

I speak the Isleno Spanish oh::h yes

Now...

I was born and raised in Delacroix Island

And when I was growing up we had three dance halls?

We had an old movie theatre.

We called it Stanley's theatre...

And uh well we would go to dances on weekends...

One was called Joe Brown's Place

We would dance there?

And there was Mr. Vincenti's

And we would dance there?

And there was Tony Molero's Place

And we would dance there.

And what I remember...

And what I really like to remember..

Was when I was really young and we used to have the Dances at Mr. Tony Molero's hall

And somebody would make gumbo and you would get a plate for a quarter?

But I never ate chicken so I never ate gumbo

But the dance hall was real big and it was nice

We had bands and the whole family would go

.Hhh and I would watch my mom and dad dance you know

And then my dad would dance with me?

And then..

And then we would put the children...

The little ones to bed to sleep so we could stay out as long as we wanted?...

And there was a song called Little Liza Jane?

And we had these ah:h bands come over

One of them was Pop Celestin

And Pop Celestin got to be real u:h famous because the Best of Pop Celestin is in the mint...

I saw it a:nd when we went with the school

I saw it cause he played at my weddin?

He wasn't a famous person? but he was there every Saturday playing

He was one of the bands that played

.Hhh and I remember we went to the mint

I brought my little grand daughter

And I said "look? this is the guy that played at my weddin

But he was nobody then..

But he got to be real famous"

I(h) said "o(h)h I knew then ha ha?"

Goin-back to Little Liza Jane?

They would start playing

And my dad..

And mother and u:h a few of the other couples that were about the same age would dance..

And they would see...

Who could dance the longest

And they would dance..

And dance..

And d(h)ance

And the band would play ha ha

Until they would finally give out

.Hhh It was fun?



Ah..

Uh, yeah, they would play to two..

Three o'clock in the mornin’

As long as we wanted?

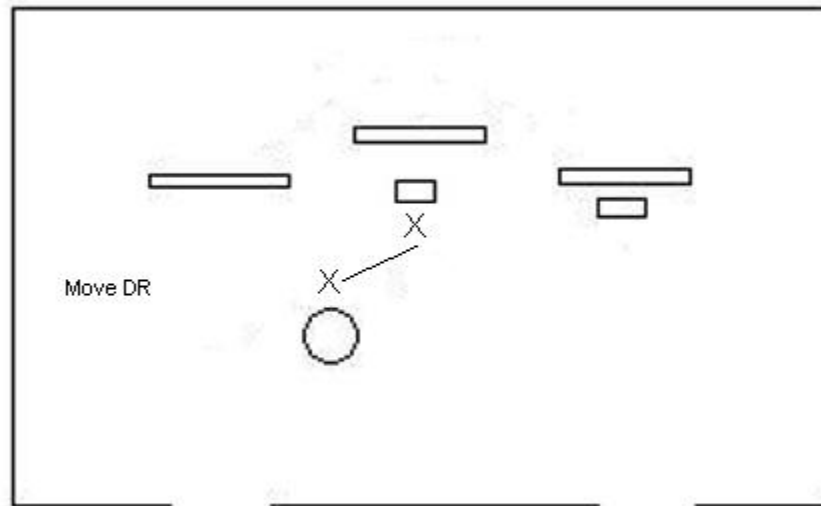


Figure 6. Stage Direction #5

**[Stand up from chair, walk down stage left to first point of dirt and address audience.]**

Down in the lower parts of St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, one can find the remnants of what used to be and what is for us referred to as “back then.” Back then when the place was once agricultural wetlands, today has been transformed into a sportsman’s paradise. Wetlands once used for farming, trapping, and fishing, can only be seen as the best fishing grounds in Louisiana.

The people who once inhabited this land are from a bygone era, Spanish speakers whose lives were the land. Few islanders can still be found in and near the area. Still be found farming, netting, carving, and returning to the water. All remember what used to be. Through stories, through song, this time, place, and these people tell us about back then.

**[Move around dirt formation imitating a trapper's movement. Two steps with left foot sweeping the dirt. Stop and bend over reaching ground with right hand. Stand up straight, and then lean out to audience with right hand reaching behind back as if to place a muskrat in a back satchel. Stand straight in neutral position and click heels twice on ground as if to shake rat down to the bottom of the bag. Precede movement while singing song verses. After sung verses, freeze movement into a frozen image of trapping.]**

**[Sing:]**

Sitting on the gallery

Sun sets over the bayou

Smell the catch of the day.

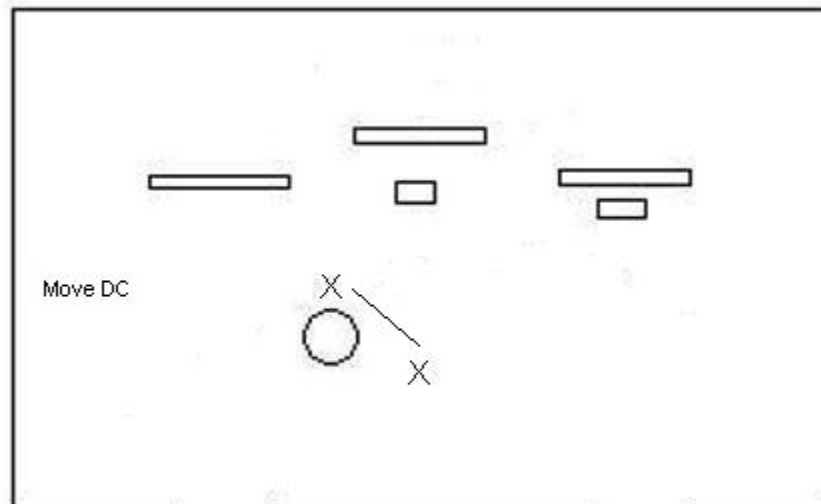


Figure 7. Stage Direction #6

**[Break out of frozen image. Walk to center stage and address audience.]**

No, really, what is a decima?

What is it?

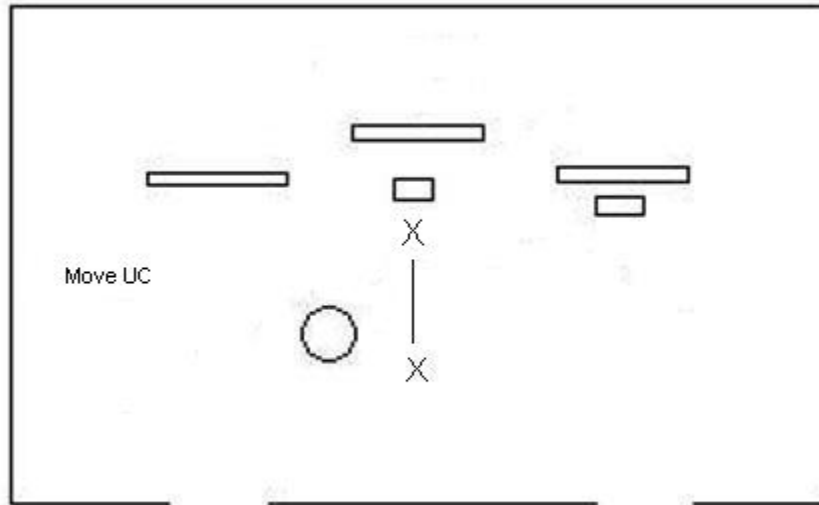


Figure 8. Stage Direction #7

**[Step back into center stage chair. Sit with legs crossed, right over left. Upper body leaning to left with right arm propped on back of chair and left arm resting in lap.]**

Helen Morales Alfonso:

Well...

At weddins

Because they had what you called pirogue weddins

They didn't have dance halls to go to the reception

We would go to the church..

Get married..

Come back

And have the reception out in the yard?

Like when I got married

We had the reception at my house?

My mother's house then.

I had an aunt living..

My dad's sister was on one side

And my mother's sister was on the other...

So we had three yards...

Ya' know what I mean

Three different yards

And ah hh what they would do is .hh ...

Ah ice up all the drinks in the pirogue

And well ah they would say "everybody serve themselves"...

And like when I got married my dad went to the French Market and bought a load of chicken

At that time everything was fresh

He got a couple of black ladies from Verret and they came over

And my aunt cooked the gumbo and they helped serve it

.Hhh So people were in and out all day long?...

And then afterwards...

After it was all over

That's when we went to the dance hall and had our dance and all that there?

But that's the way it was.

Everybody had their reception in their yard

And y(h)ou hoped it didn't rain ha ha ha

Everything was done in Delacroix Island

You didn't leave Delacroix Island for anything

((Long pause))

No.

Because at that time %I wasn't even use to Mr. Perez%

And that's because that's when I was young and we heard it only like well...

When they would be a weddin

And they would sit down there and sing

One time...

This is how b(h)ad we were.

Ha ha

Not me?

I was too young yeah

But my aunt was always picking up people you know

She was always taking care of somebody.

And this guy well...

Do you want to hear this?

It might not be what you're looking for

((Long pause))

But this guy was like a bum...

I don't know where he came from but he was a young man

He came to the Island and my cousin was gonna get married..

My aunt's daughter was getting married

So.

She picked him up and when it was time for the weddin they made him take a bath and they got my uncle's clothes next door >and dressed him up and then put a straw hat on him<

And this was a stranger...

But you can never tell what the people were going to do

They accepted him

((Long pause))

So there was another guy in there from the Island

And he was rather simple.

So they took him and ah at that time they would get ice from the block?

And this man use to play the guitar which had no tune to it?

They sat him on that block

The block of ice

And he had his little song "Rat-tat Town Rat-tat T(h)own with my Baby by My Side" ha hah

That was his song?

And he was sitting on the ice during the weddin hah hah?

But you never know what was going to happen during a weddin you know...

They were spontaneous?..

It was all in fun? but but you never can tell

Like I'll never know what happened to this po(h)or guy

I don't know if they pulled his poor plug or what...

Ha uh

Cause my aunt picked him up

And he was at the weddin playing his guitar

And he was o(h), playing his guitar(h)r ha ha...

It's just things like that happen that you never forget

You might forget other things but it's little things like that stay in your mind

But then..

My aunt picked up everybody that came along...

She was a good soul...

Her name was Louise Serigne...

Yeah.yeah.

She always had somebody livin with her

She had picked up this guy that drove everybody around

She picked him up and gave him a home...

That's why I say "she's gotta be in heaven"...

She really does...

She was a good soul.

**[Switch body position in chair to right stage. Legs uncross and stay together toes pointed and tucked under chair at a right diagonal. Hands are stretched out to meet knees and back is erect.]**

Mrs. Antonia Gonzales:

At the Island it was community.

People cared about each other.

Helped each other out?

If you were sick?

Neighbors would help out by cookin or cleanin for you

You would do this for a family

If you were low on mo:ney or fo:od people would work with you to get you back on your feet?

"Come jump on my boat. Come trap in my land."

There was always someone there you know...

Like my father

He supported his mother financially to the day she passed

It was like that.

If you walk down the road?

You walk with all of your friends

Picking up one at a time the further and further you go?

Your friends and even mothers would escort you to wherever you needed to go

The show

The dance

School

They were there for you.

It was not like today

Neighbors are strangers today...

You don't know about their lives or even what they do?

That was not so at the Island

**[Break out of previous position into arms on either armrest. Legs forward and spread apart. Slouching over.]**

Mr. Irvan Perez:

And that was the life?...

Things were tough

But they enjoyed everything they did?



Come uh Christmas..

A festival...

New Years or even Carnival?

These people would be at my grandpa's or one of those places

Or Tony Molero's...

They would uh start hoardin liquor..

Wine.

They would go out to the port of Naw Awlins.

I remember some of the wine they brought in..

Nobody could drink it?

It was some damn rough ya know...

So strong.

And uh they would bring it out on the back porch

And come Christmas day or eve they would start?

Ladies would make pi::es and cakes and everything food

I remember when I was a kid?

There was no meat to put on the table.

So me and the old man went out

Grandma said "we needed ducks for the gumbo"

So the old man took twenty-five shells

And I didn't shoot ...

I was the retrieva...

And he killed twenty-five male pintails with twenty-five shells

So that's what we had for Christmas?...

But Christmas day they would start eating and then drinking

And at this time of the day they would start?

Touring the Island

They would usually start from...

One end of the Island. and make it over to the other end.

They would tour..

And go from house to house

And I was ten or twelve years old

But they would take me cause I could sing a little?

And I made it my business to learn the decimas.

I had a good mem'ry

And uh if one of the singers couldn't make it...

Or what have you..

They would allow me to sing?

And we would do this

Touring the Island for the holidays?

And everywhere you stop they gave you a shot of wine

And ah..

That was my first drunk hah ha ((shakes head))

A(h)nd ha ha that was a foolish thing I did

Grandpa and Paul and the old man was drinking?

So they would say "give a little shot for the baby"

The baby wasn't about to take as much as the grown ups hah ah

Uhh but...

Come home and mama said

“Phine the baby's sick?”..

And ahh I was tu(h)rning green hah and upset stomach ha ha...

Aah the old man said

“Don't worry about the baby..

Just put him to bed..

Too much wine that's what the baby's got.”

Hah haha

And they would do that

Touring the Island?

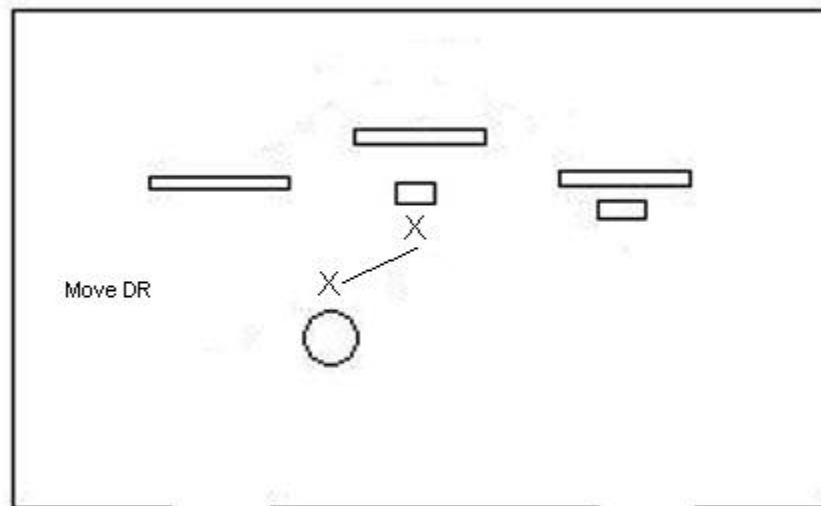


Figure 9. Stage Direction #8

**[Stand up and walk toward dirt image. In a repetitive movement, sing verses while creating a paddling movement with upper body while walking around dirt image. After singing, freeze in paddling movement.]**

**Sing:**

Sitting on the gallery

Sun sets over the bayou

Smell the catch of the day

Tillia watches the stove

Tonia nets his traps

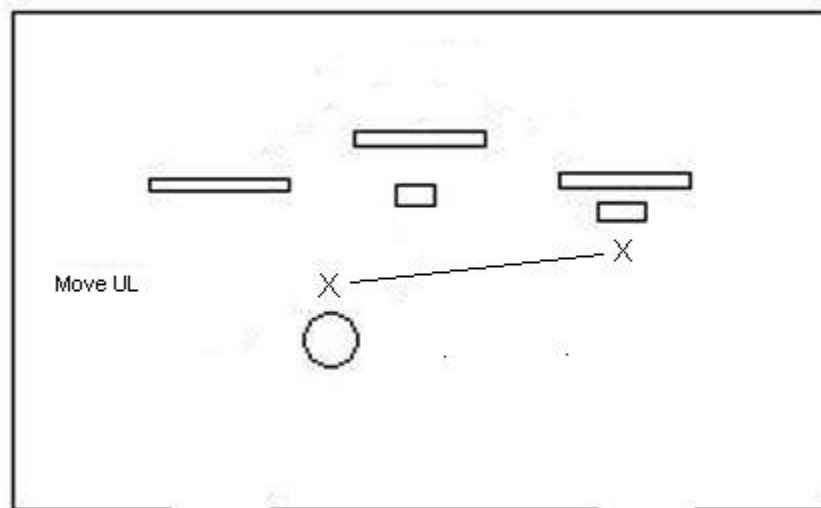


Figure 10. Stage Direction #9

**[Break out of frozen image and walk to left stage table with water pitcher and bowl. Fill bowl with water and wash hands while delivering following.]**

The singer of tales tall and true lives in a house off the road with his wife Louise. Mrs. Louise is an excellent cook. Her Caldo is a vegetable soup to remember. She prides herself on her Italian descent. She is short in stature and tall in personality. People say that she is a pepper.

The singer grows fruit trees in his backyard. Orange, lemon, and pear are among the most common. Tomato vines can be seen to the far back left of his yard. Around the front, under his carport, he leaves his garage door open during the day. This is so he and his little dog can welcome visitors while sitting in his garage. He sits in his garage and carves wood—duck mostly, sometimes other birds but only those seen around the area. Louise also makes the best biscuits, not greasy but fluffy and billowy, the kind that melt in your mouth. She calls him in for lunch. He calls out back to her. They slowly make their way to the kitchen table, the wooden table with the drop light in the center where the two laugh and eat their Caldo with biscuits.

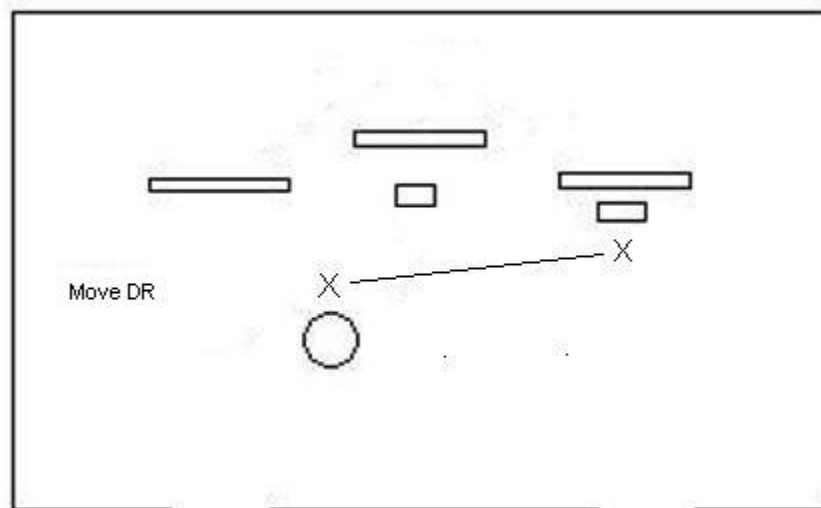


Figure 11. Stage Direction #10

**[With water pitcher in hand walk down right stage to address audience.]**

My mother said that she and her grandfather would sit on the gallery and her grandfather would say as his brother walked down the road, “Adithio Mija, Aqui viene mi hermano Chelito el cuentado. Siempre esta chucosso!” Meaning, “Here comes my brother Chelito, the Storyteller, always kidding!”

Joseph “Chelito” Campo was born in 1896 at Delacroix Island, a Spanish speaking (Isleno) community whose origins date from a late 18th century initiative to colonize Louisiana with settlers from the Canary Islands. Chelito lived in a dirt-floor house covered with palmetto leaves until he was eight. His family raised livestock and farmed vegetables. As he grew older, he continued to live the Isleno life, as a trapper of muskrat and mink and as a fisherman. Chelito Campo was also a skilled carpenter, building boats and houses around the St. Bernard area.

Chelito Campo is a celebrated folk artist of the Isleno community, whose language and history have been recorded and preserved by researchers for the past twenty years. Chelito’s art of storytelling includes riddles, proverbs, folktales and decimas. Decimas are local narrative songs composed by the decimeros. Chelito Campo was one of the last old-time decimeros in the community.

The first time I became interested in this part of my community was as an undergraduate. I was in a Folklore class and wrote my final paper on the decimas. Needing and wanting more information on this topic, I thought, why not just go to the source? So I did. I traveled down the Parish to visit and interview my Uncle Chelito. Before going on my visit, I was warned that I might need an interpreter to accompany me. I do not speak his language, and it would be pretty hard to interview a man who might be too tired to speak mine. So I brought my father along for the visit.

As we came upon his room at St. Rita’s Home, which he shared with another man, the nurse prompted him of our visit. We walked in and saw him. He had a large framed body, both wide and quite tall. His legs were almost too long to fit in his wheel chair. Like most people at the age of one hundred, he looked tired and worn down. We said hello, and I asked him if he could talk to me about the decimas for my research paper. He gladly responded by saying, “Oh

yes. Si. Yes. Do you have a tape? No, not that, a video recorder.” He mimed the video camera movement with his hands as in a game of charades. “You need a video record of me. This. You might not see this again.” So we sat. We sat and listened. We asked questions. He sat. He sat and listened. He cried. All of us laughed and enjoyed each other’s company. We exchanged gifts that day, colored pencils, an art notebook and a visit in exchange for his stories and his time.

**[Using water from the pitcher, dip hands in the pitcher and sprinkle the dirt image while delivering lines.]**

The last time I heard my uncle sing his decimas was at the celebration of his 100th birthday. His decimas include “Marcelina and the Trout,” “Pachin and the Crab,” “Conservation,” and “Los Parajitos.”

Survivors of my Uncle Chelito include daughters Melvina, Mildred, and Josephine, 13 grandchildren, 27 great-grandchildren, and many great-great-grandchildren, as well as generations of nieces and nephews, including myself, Joseph Chelito Campo’s great-great-niece.

**[Freeze in extended sprinkle image over dirt formation. Hold for five to ten seconds, then break out of image. Kneel down in back of dirt formation using repetitive movements of folding nets and gathering catch. Sing verses of song then freeze. Hold frozen image.]**

**Sing:**

Sitting on the gallery

Sun sets over the bayou

Smell the catch of the day

Tillia watches the stove

Tonia nets his traps

The little one cornered

Playing with her jacks

**[Break out of frozen image. Stay kneeling with erect relaxed back, facing audience, while addressing and kneeling behind dirt formation with hand resting on top of formation.]**

My visits down to the Island were fairly frequent and routine. I can remember my grandparents picking up my sister and me from our house. Neither one of us really ever looked that forward to going to the Island because every time we would go down there, both of us would be eaten up alive by the mosquitoes in the air. My grandparents used to say that was because we had that sweet blood that the mosquitoes liked the best. But we would go with them and they would lift us up into my grandfather's old blue clankety-clanker Ford truck. My sister and I would sit in the middle of our grandparents as we drove down the road. My grandfather would stop at a local convenience store on the way to pick up whatever he needed to bring to his mother's and would always throw in a box of sugar wafers or those pink-coated gingersnaps for my sister and me. My sister and I, being very well fed children, were in hog's heaven. So, I remember that drive down to the island, just my maw-maw, my paw-paw, my sister, and me. The whole way there, the two of us sat in between my grandparents eating our cookies, fitting as many as we could in our mouths at one time and looking down at the floor of the truck. Now, as I said before, my grandfather's truck was a big blue Ford clankety-clanker and, well, it had its fair share of rust spots. In some areas, the truck had deteriorated so badly that there were holes the size of a fist in the paneling. The holes that amused my sister and me the most were the ones on the floor of the truck near the footrests of both the driver and passenger's side. We would stuff our faces with those cookies bent over to watch the road pass by under the truck through those holes. We didn't look up until it was time to get out of the car, and even then we didn't



want to get out because then that meant we would be eaten up alive by the mosquitoes. My grandfather used to tell us that if we stared at those holes long enough, we would fall right through them. Or maybe he said, you know, the longer you stare, the bigger those holes will get. I really can't remember. Well, we never fell through but that sure never stopped us from looking.

**[Stand up from kneeling position and stay in neutral position to deliver lines.]**

Decima. Definition: A ten to twelve stanza song embodying themes of sarcasm, humor, irony, local events, mishaps and personal inspiration.

Decima Do's and Don'ts:

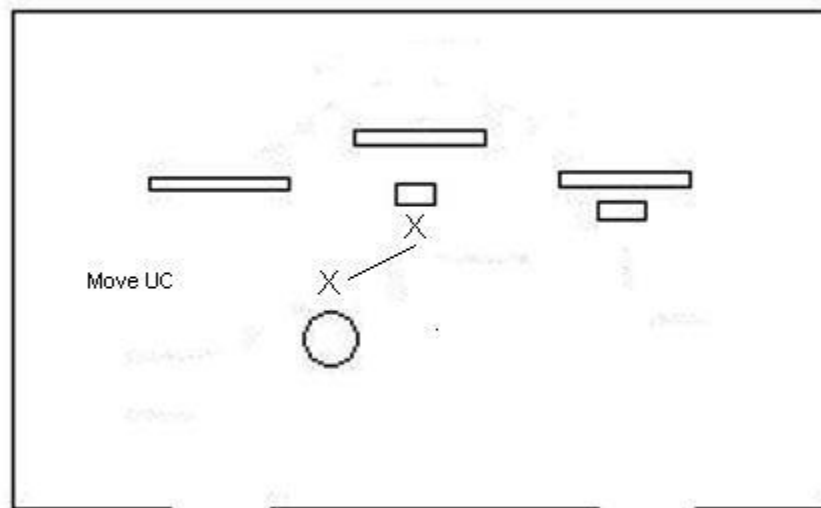


Figure 12. Stage Direction #11

**[Walk back to center stage chair and sit. Position body towards down right stage with legs together and toes pointed. Hands resting in lap.]**

Mrs. Antonia Gonzales:

I don't know any of the decimas.

I have heard them all my life?

But..

I can't remember any of them.

My father sang?

He had a beautiful voice.

He would always sing to us

He used to sing this song? >honoring the Blessed Mother<.

And he taught it to me

I could sing it to you if you like?

It's a very old song.

For the Fiesta de la Concepcion

The first one they had

Some women from Spain come over and visit

And I sang that song?

And they said "that song is not sung anymore"((clears throat))...

"The old timers use to sing it"

It is a beautiful song.....

My father never sang the decimas ((long pause))

.Hhh He did

I did hear him sing one decima ((clears throat))

He was sitting on the gallery singing

And singing about this man

This man who was a loner like ya know

And as my father was singing?...

The loner man passed by and heard him singing

The man started to get upset and said .hhh

“Why do you sing that?”

And my father said, " Oh no..

You don't understand?

This is the best compliment I can give you."...

Yes, yeah to sing about you

Well..

My father...

He was a good man

And after the man had left?

He himself got upset and started to cry

Hhhhh I remember that

**[Stay in chair and change body position to front center. Arms resting in arm rest, legs front center spread apart with feet full on the ground. Upper body slouched over.]**

Mr. Irvan Perez:

I ha::d the opportunity to do a lot...

And I appreciated that very much

My father..

My Uncle Cheche..

U:hh both Martin Alfonsos

They both sang decimas

I can put a tape together here and Martin had a good voice

Have you ever heard him sing?

Boy I tell you boy.

That man he could sing?

A::nd well..

My daddy

He too could sing

And Cheche...

Well..

He could sing

They well...

Would go from house to house

Clowning around with Miemedo Perez

I kno:w a couple of his decimas

But not all of them

But he could clown around for hou(h)rs hah

((Long pause))

A::nd believe me?

They had good decimas...

Decimas that were well composed and not well composed..

But they always had a couple of decimas that they didn't want the kids to learn.

Beca::use we::ll they we::re y::a know

A little on t:he t:he the raunchy side

If ya want to call it that hah ha

And I'm not kidding!

We::ll these old ladies

At about three o'clock in the mornin

When all the kids would go to sleep and run the big ones out

They would ask the men to sing some of the decimas that they wouldn't dare sing in public ya know?

But I always made it my business not to get too far

S::o that I could hear those decimas and le(h)arn some

((Long pause))

But the decima played a big part in our life?

That was the only history that we had.

.Hhh oral history passed down from generation...

To generation...

A::nd the decima by that time...

I tried to learn all I could?

I'm sorry I couldn't have learned more because there was at least three hundred decimas out there.

A::nd if I picked up twenty..

Twenty-four...

But..

I had..

I guess the foresight to realize that someday somebody would be looking for those decimas

But the decimas..

Believe me were the only oral history that we had?

O:::f course you could read out of books and things

Bu::t the books are only as good as the people who write them.

Just like the newspaper?

They put things in there that's not true

Ya find the same thing in books

((Long pause)) .Hhh Sure right....

But once in a while they would ask me to sing...

Especially if it was a decima they had been practicing...

I could sing then....

But there is a rule that the elders really sang them

They told you when you could sing and when not to....

.Hhh Right.....

The men would sing mostly

But? the women did as well

But elderly women...

No young girls and nobody ever got mad?.....

We::ll if somebody made a mistake?

They would in turn make sure that the composers heard about it

Because...

It was an honor...

Really to be mentioned...

Composed about..

Rehearsed and memorized.. hhh

>Continued on and everybody did it<

Well...

If you want to write one

Ya have to have something to sing about....

What? ((long pause))

The:::y would poke fun of themselves....

You can sing anybody's decimas?

You could do that now

Ya could have done that back then.

Uh..there is nothing wrong with that?

They already know who composed.

So they don't care if ya sing?

((Long pause))

>They had some decimas that I can go back and compose or get 'em pretty close to what they were<

But I don't sing them.

That's not taboo but it's not right either?

To go in and add to a decima.....

Now you see here

There is something else that ya have to remember

In other words .hh

If they composed a decima of an old person

And that person died,

A lot of times that decima died with them..

You don't sing it anymore

It was like..

Out of respect for the family

Person's dead he's dead

They thought too much of the family

And maybe a little too much of the gentleman that the decima was sung about....

One of those decimas that I can remember good .hhh

Was a Ford de Papielal hhh

>Which means a Ford that was patched up with cardboard and papers and whatever they could find<

And in the winter time this Ford was given to a certain gentleman..

And he was young?

And he told m:e..

Said we:ll his brother gave it to him and said

“I'm going to give you this Ford..

I'm going to give you this car?”

And he said “It ought to really be chunked.

It's not good for you it's not good for nobody”

He said “Oh no give it to me,

It runs..



I patched it up”

So..

>Him and his partner or friend went around and picked up all the cardboard and wooden boxes they could find at all the different stores<

And back then .hh they only had two or three stores

And they patched the car up?

But..

They made jokes about it hah ha

The:::y talked about uh giving his father in law...

This gentlemen's father in law a ride and they hit a bump in the road?

A:::nd hah his father in-law fell through the crack? Hah ha

Cle:::an out the Ford hah hah?

A(h)nd the song goes on to say?

That when they passed through Ben Chette

They heard such a noise ha ha they didn't know what it was?

The people come out scare:::d?

This gentleman driving the patched up Ford

But..

It didn't really rhyme in Spanish but it is good?

It's pretty long and pretty nice

Well composed really

But..

When he died they cut it...

They didn't sing it anymore.

((Long pause))

Normally..

A family member can continue a composer's song?

But there were decimas sung too that they didn't want to continue...

They were too bad you know?

These decimas are like everything else..

If they are not written down

Passed on from generations....

And this next generation..

Why? >they add names that were dropped out the first time the decima were sung back in olden

time and add some names to the decimas that ya know< hhh

This happened to some decimas..

Not many but a few ((Pause))

Yeah right... hh

But we don't do that.

I don't? .hh

If..

I want a decima myself

I'll compose it?

That's how Louise and I composed seventeen seventy eight

I had promised to do it?

And kept putting it off?

And one day was driving in the car and she said

“I have an idea..

Why don't we compose the song right here in the car”

“Alright”

And by the time we got to Naw Awlins I had already composed and memorized the song?

No big deal? .hh

I think a person's memory is like everything else? hhh

Say like if you had punished work and ya had to write it down

Say you missed a word or two and they make ya write it twenty times..

Well in twenty times ya got it down pack?

You don't forget that anymore.

Same thing with a decima

You had asked where the decimas were mostly composed?

Uhh ahh o:k? .hhh

Trawling..

In a boat by yourself..

In the marshes sometimes ya sing all day?

If you have a decima ya want to compose

That's the place to do it...

No telephone...

Hardly any noise outside?

Unless an airplane pass over ya

Your memory is all yours

You have no interference

S::o in that it's very easy

Over here if you try to compose a decima..

Ya have noise..

>The telephone or the wife talking to you<

And you gotta go back and start all over?

Not in the marshes

I guess a lot of composers...

We:ll this is the way it started

A lot of times in talking to people..

And even in Spain >it was the people of the farmlands people of the wilderness that would sit out  
and compose<

A lot of time if they were out driving cattle...

If yo::u would sit down and wait for daylight

It would be something to occupy your mind.

You can't sleep out there..

So ya compose and put it all together .hh

Sounds complicated but it's not. hhh

It's very easy to do?

All the old people?

My daddy..

My uncle..

>Would go out on the boat and sing while they took the wheel of the boat if they go out trawling<

Or something...

Compose or sing to try to keep their mind occupied?

Yeah...

While he was steering the boat?

There was a lot to poke fun of..

Even about yourself...

You could do that. hhh

((Long pause))

As you compose..

Ya find the tune that fits it..

A::nd >ya might change it a lil bit but it's pretty much the way ya have it in mind<

((Long pause))

Everybody don't sing the same?

Everybody don't speak the same...

People go high differently..

People go low differently?

You sing what you can do best?

And that's how the decimas go?

You only sing what you can sing da' best....

Most composers were good singers...

A::nd a decima has to have some kind of rhyme to make it work

It is most likely in couples..

Rhyming each other

((Long pause))

They sang from the heart.

That's what made a decima

They would get together during the weeks...

It didn't have to be a holiday?

And they would compose..

And they didn't care if people liked em' or not?

They sang anyway .hhh

That's what made a decima a decima.

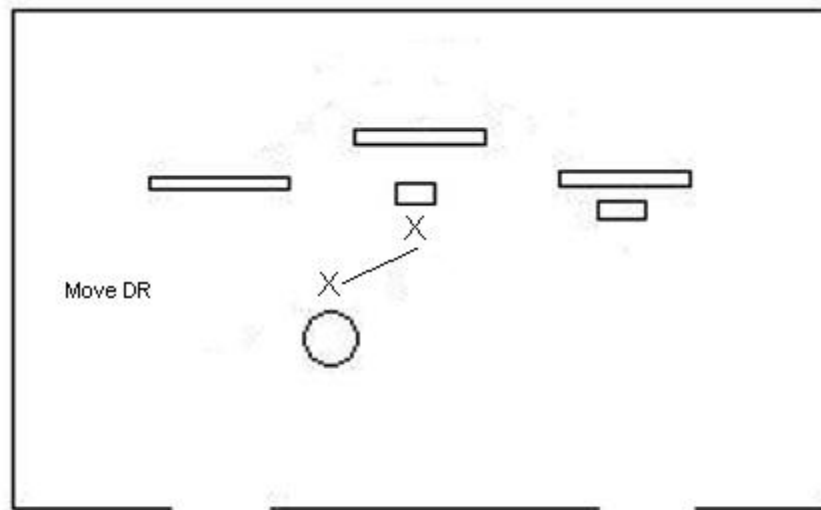


Figure 13 . Stage Direction #12

**[Stand up from chair. Walk down stage right to deliver prose. Stand in neutral position.]**

In my interviewing members from St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, for my thesis research, I tend to hear repeating phrases from different people. Phrases like, “What I remember and what I really like to remember was. . . ,” or “Oh, I use to love to watch my mom. . . ,” or “\_\_\_\_\_ was such a good soul.” I think people like to remember or hold dear to them those thoughts or glimpses of the past that were special, peaceful, calming, soothing, or just plain nice. Like Mr. Irvan Perez, one member of the community, he remembers his great grandmother holding his hands when they walked out of the house. And when she became busy, he said she would sit him on the windowsill and open the shutters. She would tell him to listen to the birds. He told me of the view outside which was of a milking cow that was being fed and the birds flying in and out of the trees. As he told me this memory, his voice softened, and his face relaxed. My mother often shares with me a similar memory of her grandmother caring for her when she was very young. Her grandmother, my Memere, owned a candy shop down in Delacroix Island. My Memere, her grandmother, would make my mother, her granddaughter, a sweet milk bottle to calm her when she became upset. My mother remembers her grandmother filling the glass bottle with milk, cream, and sugar and then pulling the rubber nipple over the glass. My Memere would hold my mother tight in her arms, while feeding her the bottle, and lovingly pinching my mother’s nose.

Well, if I were to share one of these peaceful soothing memories with another person or persons, I would have to speak about hands, my mother’s hands. I remember my mother’s hands passing over my ill belly at night as a child and those hands would make it all better. I remember my mother’s hands moving over and through my hair to comb it just right. I remember my mother’s hands in mine and mine in hers when we were in Mass, or if I just had to cross the street to go to a friend’s house. I remember my mother’s hands at work stroking away on a piece

of porcelain or on a canvas, while I sat on the floor and quietly watched her create. Her hands are a continuing paradox all their own. They are strong and delicate, sturdy and feminine, beautiful and diseased. Her hands have supported her all her life. As a hair stylist, a crafter, a sculptor, a painter, an artist and a mother she has used these extremities to their highest abilities. Her works are to be marveled at. From canvas acrylic paintings, to watercolors, and china paintings on fine porcelain, I can't get enough of what is produced with that set of hands. Every time she completes another piece of artwork all I can say is, "That one is mine. You'll have to make another for Reine." And she continues this work through the years thinking that she has not done enough of it. She says, "I don't know if I'll ever get to everything I want to paint." She also thinks that her work is never good enough, and there is always room for improvement. So for more than twenty years now she has been painting and has never stuck to one particular style. She is always experimenting, creating, and crafting with her hands that I hold so fondly in my mind. Her hands are her tools for her art. They are her vessels of expression. She always said that she had "Campo" hands. Hands like her father and her grandparents, hands that look like wide thick wooden blocks. Hands that are working hands. Hands that have seen hard times as well as good times. Hands that worked overtime to make it through those hard times. That is what my mother thinks her hands look like. I think that they resemble "Campo" hands, but I also think they stand in a category all their own. To me they look like Mom's hands. I don't have my Mom's hands. My sister has those. She has a lot of my Mother in her. I think I do too, just in a different way. A few years ago, my Mother was diagnosed with adult diabetes. This led to a related disease that affected her hands. She now has psoriasis that has gone into remission on the palms of her hands, and severe arthritis. She says, "I took for granted what I had before." Well what she had before was hands. What she has now is hands. I say to her, "They just don't



function in the same way, but they still function, and that is what's important, right Mom?" She still paints and creates different things all the time. She is still the best cook I know, especially of seafood gumbo and potato salad. She still knows how to touch my hand so delicately in that motherly way. Her beautiful yet diseased hands might slow her down just a bit but they most definitely do not stop her. She is still on the chase to do as much in a day as is possible. What I remember and what I really like to remember are my Mother's hands. Oh, I used to love to watch my mother work with her hands. My mother is a good soul.

**[Walk to stage left table and pick up basket of rocks. Move downstage left holding one rock up in fist. Deliver introduction to song. While singing place one rock in dirt formation for every verse sung. ]**

Decima by Danielle Sears

"Work in Progress"

Sitting on the gallery

Sun sets over the bayou

Smell the catch of the day

Tillia watches the stove

Tonio nets his traps

The little one cornered

Playing with her jax

Oh the sight makes

My stomach growl

Oh the sight makes

My heart sigh

Sitting on the gallery

**(End in kneeling position behind dirt formation. Freeze. Lights out.)**

## **Chapter Four**

### **Analysis and Interpretation of Script**

I staged the performance of “A Tribute to Storytellers: Isleno Decima Singers of Louisiana” in the Black Box Theatre at Louisiana State University in the spring semester of 2000. The show ran for three nights, and the final night’s performance ended with the accomplished decima singer, Irvan Perez, sharing with the audience his decimas on stage. The show has since been performed a number of times in advanced performance classes and in an interdisciplinary scholarly program, where scholars from other disciplines at LSU responded to the performance as part of the project. Portions of the script have also been performed for other classes and graduate performance hours within the Communication Studies Department at Louisiana State University.

With the diverse exposure the show has received, the comments and critiques of the show have been numerous. Whether viewed by a trained professional in performance or a lay audience member viewing for pleasure, audience members have shared insightful comments about what this show had accomplished. Evaluation from the audience has been an invaluable resource for me as a performer and researcher of the decimas. One of the reasons I value the process of performance is because of its pedagogical use for the performer and the audience. It is a teaching tool for all participants involved in the act. It teaches us about the subject, we learn from the subject, and we learn how to interpret the subject. Along with scholars such as Conquergood and Jackson, I value performance as a way of knowing.

This chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the script provided in Chapter 3 and its performance, first analyzing the composition of the performance and second audience responses. By documenting my aims in the composition of text and the choices I made in the performance, I

seek to document the learning process involved in a performance ethnography. Using these revelations of the performer paralleled with audience responses one can think about this chapter as an autoethnography of performance. As Joni Jones states in her article, “The Self as Other: Creating the Role of Joni The Ethnographer for *Broken Circles*,” “[p]erformance ethnography requires an intimate, direct and bodily awareness of one’s own culture and the culture of the other” (132). Likewise, this performance increased the depth of my understanding of my community and culture as well as myself.

This chapter will cover three elements of the script – interviews, visual images, and memory scenes. In this chapter I will also exhibit what was not seen on stage by the audience such as the performer’s motivation and rationale for choices made throughout the composition. The aim of evaluating and interpreting my own work is to heighten the understanding of the subject (decima) for all participants—performer, audience, writer and reader. As Jackson suggests, “Such a self-reflexive analysis of successes and failures, paradoxes encountered, and ideas for improvement may provoke others to conceive, create, and experiment with new kinds of scholarly performance” (22). I will explore what worked in performance, what did not, and what I learned through performing and receiving audience feedback and response

The first section of the script I will discuss concerns the natural narratives I collected in my interviews, transcribed for my script, and (re)performed in the show itself. The discussion of voice and body of performer performing other will give insight to the intended message delivered by the performer to comment on the cultural history and presence of the decima. In performing my interviews I created a sense of memories of the decimas which were linked with reflections on local history in times past, evoking a sense of what is no longer available in the environment and community in the present. Time itself became a focal point in these narratives.

As stated earlier, the narratives collected during research for this thesis came from several members of the community of Saint Bernard Parish, Louisiana. The script included segments from the interviews with four individuals: two males, Irvan Perez and Anthony Campo II and two females, Helen Morales Alfonso and Antonia Gonzales, all over the age of seventy. Each interview was at least an hour in duration. All interviewees were family members or friends of my family.

The nonverbal behaviors of the interviewees expressed a sense of comfort and poise with the subject. All interviewees were deliberate in motion, relatively graceful with their gestures and posture. As individuals, each person carried distinct nonverbal characteristics expressed through their bodies. For example, Helen Morales Alfonso sat in a chair with her legs crossed and turned to one side with her toes pointed and pressed to the floor. Her arms stayed above her chest, with one arm used to rest her head on her hand while the other arm would stay rested on the back of the chair she was sitting on. My grandfather, Anthony Campo II, slouched far into his chair with his legs stretched out in front of him and his arms crossed, resting on the crown of his distended stomach.

The verbal responses of the interviewees were also unhurried in nature. Time and care were taken with each response to a question asked. My interviewees frequently used vocal pauses, as the individual would draw or stretch out a word during thought. There were a few times in the interviews when all interviewees prefaced their responses with disclaimers and hesitations about whether or not the material they were discussing was pertinent to the interview itself.

A noteworthy characteristic of all interviewees was their use of both Spanish and English throughout the interview. All are Spanish speakers residing in Saint Bernard Parish, and all used

Spanish or Isleno dialect terms to describe the decimas, though they would also provide an English translation of what they had said. The accent of language was distinct as well; all within the community share what is sometimes described as a “harder” version of the New Orleans accent.

It was the difference in our ages that challenged me most as a performer. How was I to perform a narrative of someone who is almost fifty years older, without turning the character into a caricature or cliché? To accomplish this, I focused not only on accent and dialect, but also on the vocal pauses, hesitations, and prefaces to statements made in the interview. Through this linguistic approach I attempted to replicate these verbal cues along with the unhurried, drawn out speech patterns to create an accurate image of the speaking patterns of the interviewees on stage.

I also used other nonverbal behaviors to suggest older bodies on stage. For each narrative presented, I chose a distinct gesture or posture used by each interviewee to establish a gender and age difference among all four narratives. Because the narratives are broken up and collaged together in the script, the narratives could be linked to the interviewees by using each individual’s distinct posture and gestures to help signal to the audience which person was speaking. Audience members would hopefully understand that the performer is now performing an older man, now returning to the first woman’s narrative, and so forth. I would introduce the narrative by moving to the center stage chair, pausing for two counts, and then moving quickly into each interviewee’s “pose.” The whole gestural complex of each interviewee then begins to emerge as the narrative was delivered to the audience. I would conclude each narrative segment by quickly dropping the pose and moving to another location onstage, signaling a transition to the next section in the script.

From the responses and critiques I received, I discovered that my performance intentions in terms of characterization were only partly realized. I was told that I had displayed a “control” over the bodies presented on stage through the use of specific postures and gestures of each individual. I had developed and presented each narrative as a single frame to this very end. Interestingly, and most importantly, what I did not anticipate was the response that the narratives created a sense of unity or even “community” voice, as opposed to the singular fragmented voices that I had worked to create. Each character carried a distinctive vocal and physical characterization, yet all were unified by similarities within the content of their message. The audience commented on the narratives that spoke about personal experiences with the decimas by reflecting on their past experiences, therefore contributing a historical perspective to the performance. Audience members commented on the historical element presented throughout the performance as a unified voice or “community” voice because all had a connection with the decimas. Through the performance I have learned that in retrospect, the decimas continually demonstrate their impact on the community throughout history, time and space.

In the following paragraphs I will discuss the visual imagery presented in the transitions of the performance. The transitions can be divided into three subsections: (1) a dirt image, (2) song and repetitive dance moves, (3) and still or frozen images. All served a practical function in helping me move into and out of the poetry and narrative pieces in the script. But I also had a more poetic aim for these transitions, for I used them to comment on the influences of the decima, what inspires the Isleno people to compose and perform a decima.

The show began with a minimal stage ground plan. The only materials on stage included a table with a water pitcher, bowl and a basket of rocks on it, a chair, and a pile of potting soil. Throughout the performance, the pile of soil was worked into different shapes that could be

interpreted in many ways. As stated above, the aim was to create a sense of inspiration for the creation of the decima. I chose to use the dirt for its aesthetic value and its presence on stage, but moreover because of the multiple references to the land in the interviews and in research. The Isleno people lived off of the agricultural wetlands of the Mississippi Delta for survival. They hunted on the land, trapped on the land, farmed on the land and lived on the land. Interviewees spoke about walking barefoot on the gravel road, sleeping in the marshlands, playing in the fields and fishing on the water. The importance of the land and earth in the interviewees' stories made it imperative for me to bring in these elements into the performance itself. The land is also utilized through the composition of song. Many of the decimas refer to the geography of the land. Therefore, the choice of using the dirt image seemed, as Jackson might say, "more appropriate than 'innovative.' There was an 'of-courseness' about the idea" (25).

In the beginning of the show the soil is piled downstage right. As the show proceeds I spread the pile across the downstage center area and later worked it into an amorphous image on stage. The image is worked using water, rocks and my own body to create an image with an unclear, indefinite shape and meaning. As I shaped and molded the soil into different configurations, I was also "rehearsing" the decima I was inventing for the show. With this association, I wanted the image to create a sense of the land or earth as a source of inspiration for the creation of the decima.

From the feedback I received, I discovered that the ambiguity of the "dirt images" provoked multiple meanings for the audience. Audience members have mentioned that they saw an image of an island, a marsh, a grave, a boat, a person, and even memory, to name a few of the interpretations. Thus the dirt image "became a multiply-encoded metatheatrical device" (Suchy 155), able to comment on itself as a reinforcement of motivation in the nature of the decimas.



And as an extension my understanding of the decimas' connection to the community reached into land, death, person and memory.

The working of the dirt image is the second sub-section of the transitions in the script. Through the use of movement and dance, I was able to manipulate the dirt image in a meaningful manner. By using repetitive movements reminiscent of the laborious work occupied by the Isleno people, such as rowing, trapping, netting, feeding animals, and gathering crops, I was able to situate the body in the dirt image. The intent here was to suggest the importance of the land to the people and vice-versa. Also, by using the repetitive dance movements of trade, these images would reflect the decimas' themes of working on the land and water.

To signify the ending of a transition and the shift to a new section of the show, the repetitive movements stopped abruptly into a frozen image of arrested motion. For example, the movement of rowing was used in an exaggerated, slow motion repetition around the dirt image. The movement would then freeze and be held in position for roughly five seconds before breaking the freeze, and continuing onto the next section of the script. The choice originally served as a staging technique to clarify the ending of one frame and the beginning of another. The audience took this technique a step further by commenting on the frozen images as an ephemeral element in the show. Pollock further explains the ephemeral in performance thus: "Performative writing is nervous. It anxiously crosses various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice unable to settle into a clear, linear course, neither willing nor able to stop moving, restless, transient and transitive, traversing spatial and temporal borders, linked as it is in what Michael Taussig calls 'a chain of narratives sensuously feeding back into the reality thus (dis)enchained'" (90-91). The audience stated that the images, like the show itself, were "passing by" long enough for them to experience, but then they were gone. Later realizing the

importance of this observation, I began to think of the frozen images as a reminder to log the information presented to memory. This concept is reflexive to the interviews themselves, as when Joseph “Chelito” Campo asks if I have a recorder because I “might not see this again.” The preserving of history, of time, conversations, and performances passing, can only be accomplished by sharing our own memories of what we have experienced.

The third element of the transitions was the composition/rehearsal of song. Throughout the performance, transitions using the dirt image and the repetitive dance movements were accompanied by a decima I had composed for the script. The decima is in English and includes a memory of my mother’s grandparents caring for her when she was young. It is a memory that she shares often with the family. I introduced the decima at the very beginning of the show. The lights are dim, and the stage is bare as I stand backstage of the upstage right flat. I open the show by clearing my throat, breathing in and out and then testing a tune for the song, as the decimeros do. I try two or three different tunes before I sing “sitting on the gallery” twice, and then I step out onto the stage. The decima is revealed in increments of verses during transitions. The repetitive dance movements are performed with the decima as background music accompanied with the maneuvering of the dirt image.

With the three elements working concurrently, the intention is focused on the purpose and function of a decima in relation to the community of Saint Bernard Parish. It is a “working song” about work, sung during work. It is a graceful song reflecting the ease of labor within the community. It is repeated throughout the years. It needs to be shared, continued, and remembered to teach others about the history of the community. It is a reminder of self in relation to community and environment. As Jones suggests in “The Self as Other: Creating the role of Joni the Ethnographer for *Broken Circles*”, when she describes her role as both “we” and

“they”, likewise in my performance “this created for the audience a shifting identification with positions of other/self, same/different, insider/outsider” (142). The decima reminds the self that he or she is part of the whole.

I also wanted the decima I composed to come across as a process, rather than a product, something that is constantly being worked through, that is never completely “finished.” New decimas can be composed and performed for others. There are people in the community who do compose their own decimas to this day, composing both Spanish and English versions of the form yet still keeping with the traditions of the decima. I too attempted this kind of performance in the show. Not speaking Spanish and only beginning my research of the decima, I created my own beginnings of a decima. I concluded the show with the full composition of the decima. I prefaced this final rendition by stating, “Decima, by Danielle Sears. Work in Progress.”

In the conclusion of the show I walked around the dirt image placing ten rocks to outline the image on stage. The ten rocks were symbolic of each stanza in the decima being grounded in the dirt image on stage, and so I made the statement that this autoethnographic study/performance is not final. It is a part of the performer that sits next to the image working to continue the research of her familial cultural history, it is a part of the family of Irvan Perez who study and bring the decimas forward, it is a part of the Isleno Cultural Society, and the Canary Island’s Descendants’ Association. While others have written on the decima and the Islenos, in the spirit of performance ethnographers like Dwight Conquergood, Joni Jones, and Shannon Jackson, I am expanding this area of research through performance. “Whereas performance bypasses the conventions of written documents that ‘dehydrate’ lived experience, the conventions by which it ‘rehydrates’ its subject-matter generate an interpretive relationship

between experience and scholarship, not a mimetic one” (Jackson 41). Therefore my performance differentiates itself by creating a representation of context as ethnography

This brings me to the final element of the script that I would like to discuss—the one most frequently remarked in comments on the performance. The theme of memory that I had chosen to foreground in the show sparked interest in the performance. Memory is defined by the act of recalling, retelling, forgetting, and storing information for the sake of preserving the past. In all the segments of the script and performance the concept of memory was integral to the equation of creating “A Tribute to Storytellers.”

The idea to include this element first began with the narratives collected for the research. In the accumulated interviews, the interviewees had to move through the development of recalling in order to retell the past. In going through this procedure, the interviewees would state explicitly that the act of recalling was a bit arduous for them. Though challenged with their memory, all successfully recalled information concerning the decimas and their community by taking their time in choosing their wording during the interview. As a performer, I tried to emulate this arduous act by including their pauses, hesitations, problems and repairs in speech patterns and by repeating their disclaimers. For example, I commonly recorded phrases such as: “I don’ know if you want to hear this?” and “I don’t know if this is what you’re looking for?”

I continued the thread of memory by weaving the concept into my own pieces of poetry and prose in the script. All my original compositions are built to some degree from my own memories, for example, of my great grandmother undressing for bed, my trips to Delacroix Island, my visits to Irvan and Louise Perez’s home, my Uncle Chelito’s one hundredth birthday celebration, and my mother’s hands. Particularly in the last personal text about my mother’s hands, I introduce the piece by stating that this is indeed a memory I hold fondly in my mind. It

is a personal example I provide, like those offered by the interviewees, that traces the stream of consciousness one has in reflecting back on memories of the past. Throughout this piece the words “I remember my mother’s hands” are repeated throughout in order to reiterate the stream of thoughts one can experience when such an image comes to mind in the manner of what Ulmer calls a “mystory”: “The chance or coincidental convergence of details linking one situation with another provides an organizing structure with which to pull together the disparate materials of one’s mystory. Mystory, in other words, achieves coherence not at the level of generality—of concepts or abstractions that embrace and unify diverse particulars under one category—but at the level of the particular itself, through the repetition of concrete details within the words (sounds and images) of the text” (298).

The transitions throughout the script also comment on the act of memory through the construction of the dirt image along with the singing of the decima and the repetitive movements. The building of the image using the repetitive labor movements throughout creates a sense of structure for memory. As I physically handle the dirt formation throughout the show, the audience is reminded viscerally of the labor of recalling the past. It could be a taxing venture for someone reaching for memories that have been stored away for years without any recent emergence of those memories. Exercising those long-term memories facilitates those thoughts so that recalling runs smoothly. The physicality of the transitions was aimed at paralleling the idea of exercising the mind, not literally, but metaphorically. As Pollock argues, “Performative writing is evocative. It operates metaphorically to render absence present—to bring the reader into contact with ‘other-worlds,’ to those aspects and dimensions of our world that are other to the text as such by re-marking them” (80). I forced the audience into active recalling of the past, present and what might be the future.

The addition of the “work in progress” decima assisted in building the notion of assembling a “whole” memory from pieces or fragments of memory. By scripting selected verses of the song to be presented at different intervals of the show, I hoped to create the logic of filtering through memory. Performing bits of the decima in all directions until fully revealed is evocative of the leakage of memory, where streams of thoughts create an entire memory of the past in a sudden, uncanny flash that Ulmer aptly names a “eureka intuition,” as opposed to a hermeneutic insight. As Ulmer states in Heuretics, “In a eureka intuition, the materials of a disciplinary problem are brought into sudden, unexpected relationship with other areas of a thinker’s experience, with the mediating link being precisely a Psychological Gesture. Eureka insights are said to arise out of the peculiar way memory stores information in ‘emotional sets,’ categories classified not in terms of logical properties but common feelings, feelings that are based in eccentric, subjective, idiosyncratic physiognomic perceptions” (142).

The decima I composed and sang is itself a memory remarking on the process of gathering recollections, and is therefore a third metacommunicative act (along with the natural narratives and personal texts) within the transitional sections throughout the show. The memory of a mother’s childhood shared with her daughter, communalized with the audience by the performer, facilitates the action of passing down history to others, creating a memory about memory. Every time the memory is expressed through a new voice, it is rewritten. “Performative writing is citational . . . [it] quotes a world that is always already performative—that is composed in and as repetition and reiteration. Citational writing figures writing as rewriting” (Pollock 92). With all acts of the transitions functioning together as a constructed memory, the performance of remembering the past land, work and song complemented the rationale of the show, to pay tribute to the Isleno storytellers of Louisiana.

The metacommunicative rudiments of the show can be viewed as multidimensional metaperformance as well. As in Patricia Suchy's essay, "A Complex Double Vision: The Motives Behind the Masks in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," which focuses on the development of staging the performance *Invisible Man* by analyzing and interpreting three key scenes of adaptation (145), this chapter also focused on the process of staging and acclimatizing research to staged performance by investigating three key aspects of the script. Suchy's article "rehearses the production process and examines the implications of staging Ellison's novel as a metaperformance text" (145). In using this article as a methodological foundation, I was able to look at my script as a metaperformative text.

By staging the research of the decimas, I was able to recreate the process of the decima as an event and performance. From the initial stage of composition to rehearsal and performance, the show continually returned to the construction of the decimas. Using performance on stage in the Black Box Theatre to research the form of the decima permitted the peeling away of layers involved in creating a show dedicated to a performative art form.

In Jones's essay, "The Self as Other: Creating the Role of Joni The Ethnographer for *Broken Circles*," she explains the power of performance in creating knowledge and understanding of what is studied by stating:

I come to know the Yoruba, and my self, more complexly when I perform the Yoruba. While I might be able to write what I "discovered" about the Yoruba, my performance reveals what I know about the Yoruba, with the clear implication that such knowing is a blend of memory and experience. Bateson states, "the assumption is that you first learn a role and then you perform it. Now I'm arguing that this often happens the other way around. You have to begin *performing* a role before you *learn* it, and *the learning never ends*." Bateson's belief harkens to Don Geiger's compelling observation, ". . . understanding by way of realizing is a particular kind of knowing." Indeed, performance as knowing is a basic tenet of performance studies. (143; Jones's italics)

Like Jones, I too come to know the decimas by performing the decimas. By performing my research, my experience, my memories of the decimas, I too disclose what I know and want others to know and learn about the decimas and my community. In performing the research and becoming a decimero myself, I understand the learning process of the role as a boundless procedure. It can be interpreted and analyzed in multiple directions by you and by your audience members.

By exposing all elements like Jones, we can better understand how such an event operates in the Isleno community. We can also understand how others are affected, how others respond, critique and learn from such performances on stage and in community activities. Through discussion of the script, it is evident that performance as a way of knowing is only the beginning of the learning process.



## Chapter Five: Conclusion

When I began this research as an ethnographer, I did not realize initially that this project would eventually lead to a scripted piece for performance on the stage. I also did not take into account the degree it would affect my life. While completing this text, I am still researching information concerning the decimas and the Isleno people of Saint Bernard Parish, Louisiana. There are several reasons for aspiring to press on with the research that began five years ago.

To begin, I am a native of Saint Bernard Parish, Louisiana, having resided in the area until the age of eighteen when it was time for college. My parents and family still reside in Saint Bernard Parish giving me ample motivation to frequent the area still. I consider Saint Bernard Parish my home. My home defining my family, my land, and my history. My family is descended from the Canary Islanders. My mother grew up in Delacroix Island, Louisiana, one of the Spanish speaking communities in Saint Bernard Parish. Her father and grandparents spoke the Isleno Spanish, with her father still speaking Spanish today.

Because my mother did not learn the language, it was not taught to me or my siblings, yet when spending time with my grandparents and great grandmother as a child, I remember the only language they spoke to each other was Spanish. As an outsider in the conversations due to language barriers and age separation, I was always intrigued by my elders. They were so different from me, yet they were my family. Visits and time spent together were plentiful enough to feel like an insider, but it was still not enough.

When I think about my grandparents and my great grandmother I think about the Island. I think about her two story cinder block home over looking the water on Bayou Road. I can remember the rows of shrimp and trawl boats parked along the edges of the water. I can

summon up the abundance of mosquitoes in the air unless there was a strong breeze passing through, and then the air would serenely clear. I dredge up the overwhelming scent of the marshes mottled with the smell of seafood pulled up from the depths of their dwellings. I keep in mind the pitch of darkness that would set in at nightfall. I evoke the sounds of all the creatures surrounding me from the marshlands, the bayou and in the atmosphere. All are lucid in my mind as a place both mysterious and comforting at the same time. This land was and is not like my home in Chalmette, which is a middle class, cookie cutter square in an industrial suburbia. The Island was and still is a place of wonder for me. I enjoy the curiosity I have acquired in collecting information about the Island and my family who once lived there.

I am also in constant awe of the history of my family and their community as Spanish speakers. The idea that my ancestors traveled from the Canary Islands to Louisiana, settled and remained an isolated community for more than two hundred years astounds me. The oral traditions and language of the community have only begun to dwindle in my grandfather's generation. In those members of the community there is an abundance of stories, accounts and narratives brimming with historical information. There are people in the community such as my father who learned his trade of carpentry from the elders in the community. Spending long hours with his father-in-law, grandfather-in-law and other members of the community on construction jobs and fishing ventures has earned him a collection of stories that were told by those who lived the history. People in the community, like my parents who appreciate the importance of the past and the retelling of the past, are invaluable sources to those of us who want to learn more about the history of Saint Bernard Parish.

It is all these accumulations of my history that beckon me to further research. As Gregory Ulmer would explain, a mystory compiled of history and personal experience allows me to

research a topic I am so closely linked to. In my “eureka experiences,” I am allowed to make sense of the stream of consciousness I experience when contemplating the study of the decimas and the Isleno people. This research has allowed me to understand the elements of the decima by analyzing its form as a verbal art and as an event through the works of Richard Bauman. In using research concerning storytelling, oral history, oral poetry and social dramas, I have been able to interpret the decima as a performative form of discourse related to my own studies in communication. By taking into account the research that has been accomplished in the past from other disciplines on this subject; I have been able to further the preservationist aims of folklorists and oral historians by constructing my own performance of the decimas and what they mean to me and my community.

In creating a script from thesis research, I have been able to go a step further and practice the art form of the decima myself. The metaperformance shaped for the stage has allowed me to view the subject as a participant, not as an observer. I am a decimero now with a decimero's perspective on what needs to be communicated to others in order to teach and pass down the history of the Islenos and their decimas. Through the performance of natural narratives, poetry, prose, movement and images I was able to discover the rationale of composing, rehearsing and performing a decima. The decima teaches us about the history of Islenos but also about ourselves. It is a worthwhile exploration to record the past with the intention for others to learn from us, as well as gazing back in order to learn from ourselves.

The challenge in researching oral traditions of the Saint Bernard Parish Islenos is the distressing reality that people are not immortal. As time moves on, more and more Spanish speakers from my grandfather's generation get older, more tired and some, like my grandfather, lose their memory. Without the passing of oral traditions within the families, there is a great

possibility that the language and oral traditions will die out. Members who still speak the language are few in number. Those who remain active are desperate to participate in any form of preservation available to them, like Irvan Perez, who at eighty years of age is still considered the preeminent historian of the community. It is people like Irvan Perez who will continue to make an effort in preserving the history of his people. Members like Helen Morales Alfonso, Antonia Gonzales, and Anthony Campo II, who are willing to share past memories with interested students like myself, are invaluable to the community. Also, those families like that of Kenneth and Linda Sears, who take pride in their teaching of the past by consistently reminding their children of their roots in order to teach them something about who they are, also are priceless assets to the community.

All of these generous souls have also been cherished by me as a researcher, a performer, and a member of the community. Because I am surrounded by those who care enough about their past and everything that goes along with their history, I too feel an overwhelming sense of pride in belonging to such a community. A community that has thrived on each other's communication for over two hundred years seems an amazing feat to me.

This research and performance is not complete for this very reason. It is my obligation to continue my family's and my community's effort in preserving our past. Through the discipline of performance studies I hope to continue to explore new forms of research and study that assist me in creating texts for my audience. As a researcher, writer, and performer of the decimas I will continue the legacy of composing orally performed verbal artworks for my communities in the years to come.

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## Appendix Transcription Symbols

The following set of symbols are typographic symbols used to highlight delivery features within the verse structure presented in chapter three.

<u>stress</u>	Underlining indicates stress or emphasis. EX: <u>What</u> you talkin bout?
pt	This symbol indicates an audible lip smack or click of the tongue.
stretch	Colons are used to indicate extension of the sound immediately preceding; several colons may be used in proportion to the length of the extension. EX: A:::nd we would go to the dance.
%word%	Enclosing a word or phrase in percentage signs indicates that it was said more quietly than the surrounding talk. EX: He has %cancer%.
wha-	Hyphen following a sound indicates a cut-off of sound, a glottal stop. EX: She made me a lil baby pillo- to rest my head
?	A question mark is used to indicate a rising pitch at the end of a word or phrase; the speaker may or may not be asking a question. EX: Well? We would dance there?
.	A period indicates a falling pitch at the end of a word or phrase. As above, the speaker may or may not have come to the end of a complete sentence.
(( ))	Double parentheses are used to enclose nonverbal, nonvocal sounds that can't be described exactly. ((Shakes head)) ((long pause)) ((clears throat))
...	Ellipses are used to signify pauses, with additional periods added in proportion to the length of the pause.
hah hah	Vocalized nonverbals and laughter are written out by what is heard, such as: "ah::ha"; "u::hh"
Ye(h)s	Laughs occurring within words are signified by using an "h" enclosed in parentheses: Th(h)at was a fo(h)olish thing I di(h)d.
“ “	Quotation marks are used much as they are in printed literary narratives: to signify that the speaker is speaking in someone else's voice, mimicking how someone speaks, giving a direct quote from someone else, or reporting his/her own direct speech (or thoughts) at the time the events transpired.

- hhh The h's indicate audible out-breaths or gasps (as above, number of h's is variable).
- .hh A period is used before h's to indicate in-breaths or gasps (as above, number of h's is variable).
- > < The "greater than" and "less than" signs are used in this way to bracket talk that is spoken at a markedly faster rate than the surrounding talk.



## **Vita**

Danielle Elise Sears was born July 19, 1974, in New Orleans, Louisiana. In May of 1992, she graduated from The Academy of the Holy Angels, and subsequently entered Louisiana State University. She received her Bachelor of General Studies in December of 1996. In January of 1997, she entered the Master of Arts program at Louisiana State University, where the focus of her course work was performance studies. Danielle will pursue a doctorate in performance studies at Louisiana State University, where she will continue to study performance and ethnography.