

Towards Greater Collaboration in Oral Tradition Studies

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A key player among Iberian oral traditions, the pervasive and resilient pan-Hispanic *romancero* merits attention not only for its sheer volume, its vast temporal and geographic span, and its cultural, thematic, and musical diversity, but also for its complex interconnections both with other Hispanic and pan-European verbal art forms and with the learned literary and musical traditions of the Peninsula and beyond.

Of the more than three thousand distinct ballad narratives produced, re-created, and documented in one or more of the five peninsular languages from the fifteenth century to the present day, some one thousand *romances* have been recorded in the modern oral tradition on no fewer than five continents and often in hundreds (and in some cases thousands) of versions.¹

Differences with respect to other oral genres notwithstanding, Hispanic ballads manifest certain fundamental features and behaviors common to all living traditional art forms.² Most notable is the intrinsic openness of their narrative, poetic, and musical structures and their concomitant dynamic and inexorable transformation across time and space in response to changing aesthetic and ethical values and evolving linguistic, ideological, and socioeconomic systems.

As students of the *romancero* we recognize that each time a traditional ballad is re-created (in our case, brought into a singer's repertoire), a unique compromise has been effected between the opposing forces of heredity and innovation at each level of organization of the ballad's

¹ My online Pan-Hispanic Ballad Project may be accessed at <<http://depts.washington.edu/hisprom/>>. It currently includes some 4900 versions of 930 old and modern traditional ballads. Some 200 versions are accompanied by the original field recordings (in streaming media and MP3 formats).

² For a succinct, insightful overview of Hispanic oral traditions, including the *romancero*, see Zemke 1998. For a brief history of the Hispanic ballad and a description of its thematic subtypes, see Armistead 1988. For a detailed discussion of poetics of the *romancero*, see Catalán et al. 1988. For an extensive bibliography (5000 citations) see Petersen, <<http://depts.washington.edu/hisprom/biblio/index.php>>.

various structures. Yet as researchers rather than bearers of the tradition, we are non-native speakers of this coded oral poetic language and, despite recent progress, we don't fully understand how the forces that govern a ballad's transmission and transformation work.

Given the dynamic nature of the model, it is surely the case that the larger and more varied our sample of an oral genre (or work), the greater our chances of deciphering its coded language, interpreting its meanings, and understanding its mechanisms of variation. Few stand to benefit more profoundly than oralists from the information technology revolution that has brought us the internet, platform-independent multimedia applications, and web services. We are now discovering how greatly these tools facilitate and enhance appreciation of verbal art forms heretofore largely denied both a voice and a context. For scholars interested in implementing web-based technologies to advance their own research on an oral tradition, the potential benefits go well beyond the dissemination of integrated collections of texts, sound, still images, and video, together with links to relevant secondary information. However, the tools so well-suited to compress and store, process, transfer, and display traditional datasets can readily become a source of considerable frustration for the technologically challenged literary scholar faced with choosing among competing platforms and software and decisions regarding data structure and web interface design. Given the rate at which technology is evolving and the limited availability of technical advice from information specialists who fully grasp the complexities of our data and the programming requirements for sophisticated intertextual comparisons and statistical analysis of extensively cross-referenced data items, we can easily soon come to regret computing decisions we've made along the way. Thankfully, with the advent of XML Web services technologies, solutions to these problems are at hand.

Among its advantages, this flexible model requires no central coordination and imposes no restrictions on the technologies used (hardware platforms, operating systems, software, programming languages, devices, and so on). It permits incremental development of applications and, most importantly, allows linking, sharing, and passing data among independently developed datasets. Any corpus of oral traditional works encoded in a consistent fashion for certain of its features can be converted to XML format and thereafter linked to other XML-tagged documents with which it shares at least one identified characteristic. In our ongoing efforts to establish typologies and correctly interpret the function of such common key elements as motifs, formulas, exordia, refrains, rhetorical devices (and many more features), this ability to query across a large number of diverse, independently developed oral tradition collections will be invaluable.

In preparing our collections for the web, whether we choose to implement the XML Web services model from the outset or postpone

delivering our data in XML format until data transfer speeds improve and our clients' browsers can interpret it more efficiently, our collective and individual interests are best served by working towards referencing and linking all of the world's oral traditions.

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