

## Tropical Sensibility: Caetano Veloso on the Use and Disuse of Tradition

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*When trying to understand modern ruptures, the revitalization of tradition inherent in supposedly destructive tactics is readily apparent. Stravinsky and Schoenberg seem to intend not that we stop listening to Bach in order to listen to them, but rather that we become better listeners of Bach for having listened to them. In fact, all modernisms upon deeper examination show themselves to be a struggle against the imminent obsolescence of a past so beautiful as to be on the verge of banality.*

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*I no longer desire to thrive on nostalgia for other times and places; on the contrary, I wish to incorporate that nostalgia in a future project.*

- Caetano Veloso, *Tropical Truth: A Story of Music and Revolution in Brazil*

I

From a strictly geographical point of view, Brazil has in it something that is deeply congruous with its neighbours to the North. They are all, for better or worse, fundamentally, foundationally, *west of West*. They pose dangerously as, on the one hand, the gainful models of culturally felicitous satellites to an ageing but still deeply ingrained civilization, and on the other hand, as the face of a mutation of that selfsame civilization, more monstrous in scope, in potentialities, ruddy with an uncertain but irresistible promise. The monstrous adventure of slavery, taken together with the project of supplanting the indigenous peoples of this monstrous land mass *west of West*, attests in certain measure to the scope and potential of this *mutation* as a new phase in the trajectory of human culture, and perhaps even—time will tell—human consciousness. Speaking from the standpoint of tradition, this land mass that we inhabit, whose air we breathe, whose earth we tread, and whose colours have coloured our imaginations—this land is born of a tradition which is ethically compromised. In some sense, it is the child of evil; an evil unleashed by the same logic that spread (and continues to spread) the more edifying and enlightening features of civilization. As Walter Benjamin famously remarked in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." So that the phrase *west of West* is not only a device of orientation for the purposes of defining our historical understanding of the development of these new world cultures, but also the phrase engenders a mirror-image: the emergence of a *double* as a delocalized mutation, looking back across an ocean of space at the face of its other, and gauging its self accordingly.<sup>1</sup>

When near the end of his book *Tropical Truth: A Story of Music and Revolution in Brazil*, Caetano Veloso uses the phrase "a West to the west of the West,"<sup>ii</sup> it comes in the wake of a decades-long musical and cultural experiment that has affirmed his deeply seated colonially neurotic suspicion that Brazil, as a unique manifestation of Western civilization has a vital role to play in advancing the trajectory of culture unleashed by that civilization. The book, in large

part, traces the musical project of reconciling the uniquely regional character of Brazilian song with the mainstream musical trends of a globalized pop-culture. In the course of working out this project, a complicated conversation with tradition ensues, one that arguably carries larger resonances far beyond both the song-form and Brazil.

Caetano Veloso is one of the most prolific Brazilian singer-songwriters, as well as being a filmmaker and a writer. He emerged in the middle of the 1960s, in the heyday of Bossa Nova, as part of a budding movement of young musicians who were attempting to alter the direction of popular Brazilian music so that it would engage in a more essential way with the global culture of music. This movement came to be known as *tropicalismo*, and Veloso gives us its mandate at the very beginning of the book, writing:

*Tropicalismo wanted to project itself as the triumph over two notions: one, that the version of the Western enterprise offered by American pop and mass culture was potentially liberating - though we recognized that naive attraction to that version is a healthy impulse - and, two, the horrifying humiliation represented by capitulation to the narrow interests of dominant groups, whether at home or internationally. (7)*

Situated, as it is, between the emergence of, on the one hand, Bossa Nova as Brazil's greatest domestic export and also its most refined incarnation of populist sentiment, and on the other hand the explosion of pop-culture on an international scale, the generation behind *tropicalismo* displayed a heady admixture of cultural receptiveness joined to a steadfast adherence to the deeply regional (in this case, Northeastern Brazil) elements of artistic formation. When Veloso speaks of the "capitulation to the narrow interests of dominant groups ... at home," he is in large part referencing the attempts of the Left-wing bloc of 1960s Brazil to appropriate, or *nationalize*, the cultural project of popular Brazilian music (MPB - Musica Popular de Brasil, a genre of music) to make it serve a nationalist agenda. This left-wing nationalist agenda had for its aim the emancipation of Brazil from its servile relationship to a hegemonic Cold-War era U.S.A, both politically and culturally. It is not an un noble aim, as far as political agendas go. However, Veloso and his fellow *tropicalistas* were determined to safeguard the autonomy of the cultural project of MPB, distrusting the single-mindedness of the Left-wing nationalists, and seeing in it not an emancipation of Brazilian culture, but rather a capitulation to the false dichotomy dictated by the very same logic of hegemony that those nationalists were attempting to overcome. In the chapter "Bethania and Ray Charles" Veloso recalls an argument he has in 1965 with Augusto Boal, a renowned theatre director and author in his own right, and founder of the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, a form of theatre explicitly devoted to the promotion of social and political change. After they both watch a musical play, Veloso admits to being "touched by the show's poetic way of introducing authentic musicians of the most refined carioca samba tradition," while Boal finds it "folksy". Recalling this interaction and seeing in it the beginnings of the *tropicalismo* outlook, Veloso goes on to say:

[I]t seemed to me that to dismiss a show like that was to discard a rare opportunity to see clearly the potential beauty to which we might lay claim and so far only hinted at. Furthermore, the nationalism of leftist intellectuals, being merely a reaction to North

American imperialism, had little or nothing to do with liking things Brazilian or—and this interested me even more—with proposing original solutions for the problems of humanity and the world from the standpoint of our own way of doing things. Their only solution was a given, and had arrived ready-made: to attain socialism. (49-50)

In that sense, *tropicalismo* was seeking to situate itself within a broader, deeper narrative; a narrative that transcended the geopolitical concerns of the contemporary moment; a narrative that had at its very core not the historically-conditioned paradigm of political rebellion, but rather an ever-vigilant, ever-productive participation with the most fundamental sources of its cultural identity. More significantly, this outlook liberated and enriched the *tropicalistas* artistically, empowering them to be more receptive to the resonances and reverberations of those fundamental sources of Brazilian cultural identity present in non-Brazilian cultural expressions. Put another way, *tropicalismo* was engaged in a conversation with tradition, by tradition, and *for* tradition.

## II

Much of *Tropical Truth* is devoted to the tracing of artistic lineage among the different streams of MPB, particularly as they relate to the development of *tropicalismo's* musical project. It is in drawing up this musical genealogy that Veloso displays his rich, complex, and even dizzying vision of how tradition makes itself felt.<sup>iii</sup> Perhaps it is essential to note at the beginning of this commentary on Veloso's vision that his concept of musical tradition, and tradition in general, involves a certain *quietness* in its passing from one era to the next. This is a significant thing to note, since throughout the book Veloso almost always turns a contemptuous eye on the various musical offspring of his era which proclaim tradition as a foundational consideration in their music-making without confronting the roots of that tradition in an honest and intellectually rigorous spirit. The implication is that those who would treat tradition as a dumb idol consign it to a petrified position in which it can contribute nothing but its surface appearance, namely its official normative appearance. This, adversely, is the *loud* tradition.

Very early on in his book, Veloso sets a pattern that would predominate for the whole of the text. As hinted above, it is what may be termed a genealogical approach. Instead of drawing up a family tree of resemblances, in which things adhere to one another through a test of verisimilitude, Veloso carefully and meticulously, with a care that borders on the obsessive, explains the parentage of a musical evolution. In the second chapter of the book, entitled "bossa nova," Veloso describes his first encounter with the music of the man who is unanimously credited with originating the style that has become most synonymous with the image of Brazil in the international psyche: João Gilberto. After giving us the entire lyrics to one of the anthems of the Bossa Nova style, "Desafinado," Veloso foreshadows his whole approach to the formulation of tradition, as he describes the way in which the Bossa Nova from its very inception was insinuating new ways not only of projecting the future but also of projecting the past. By establishing a position from which to innovate while still enjoying the popular musical traditions of Brazil, imagining a different future with the past in a different light, João struck a

chord with music critics, avant-garde poets, and the percussion masters of the *escolas de samba*. (22)

What Bossa Nova was able to do is embody a musical continuum in such a way as to suggest a vital link between a living tradition that was intrinsically regional, represented in the above quote by the “*escolas de samba*” (traditional samba schools), and the project of musical modernization that attempted to elevate the cultural cache of Brazilian music by looking *outward* rather than inward for artistic innovation. In the familiar stand off between deeply rooted traditional forms and the drive to modernize, João Gilberto emerged as the prophet of a higher ground. Apart from the more practical musical influence that Gilberto exercises on Veloso’s vocal phrasing and compositional techniques, it is this higher ground beyond the false and barren dichotomy of the old versus the new which is the main contribution to Veloso’s artistic sensibility as well as *tropicalismo*’s artistic ethos. And when the time came, this higher ground allowed the *tropicalistas* to move into fresh creative terrain unencumbered by the rigid technical demands of Bossa Nova, which had begun undergoing a process of artistic calcification as a result of mass appeal and commercial success.<sup>iv</sup>

João Gilberto released his groundbreaking album *Chega de Saudade* in 1959, launching the Bossa Nova movement. By 1967, when battlefronts were being drawn up by *bossanovistas*, whose project was to nationalize this musical genre into an engine of mass political agency, and on the other side the *Jovem Guarda* (“Young Guard”), a group who were looking to American and British rock music as a way out of the artistic hegemony and stagnation of Bossa Nova, Veloso and his compatriots managed to tread the higher ground by borrowing from both groups and digesting the material according to their own fiercely receptive non-aligned sensibility. *Tropicalismo*’s very first song, “Alegria, alegria”, nationally televised as part of the TV Record Festival of 1967, exhibits not only this spirit of artistic openness but also a non-aligned political and intellectual awareness that gave the movement a real modern edge and a richer compositional resourcefulness. In this extract from the chapter “Alegria, alegria”, Veloso explains with an example:

Although it was arrived at lightheartedly, one aspect of the composition of “Alegria, alegria” says a great deal about the intentions and possibilities of the *tropicalista* moment. In striking an intentional contrast to the manner of bossa nova—a formal structure in which altered chords move with natural fluency—here the perfect major chords are oddly juxtaposed...The lesson from the Beatles that [Gil Gilberto—fellow *tropicalista*] wanted from the start to incorporate was that of an alchemical transformation of commercial trash into an inspired and free creation, as a way of reinforcing the autonomy of the creators—and of the consumers. (103)

Perfect major chords, the main ingredient in most “commercial trash” of the sixties popular mass music terrain, are here being handled with a sense of artistic deliberateness that is driven by an awareness of the sociological effect behind the musical gesture. This is a music that moves beyond the desire for mass commercial appeal or the cultural posturing of the “rock-versus-MPB war [that] was already old hat.”(96) This is a music with a brain. It is a music

informed by a wide-ranging continuum of cultural references and heavily engaged with the most artistically daring and experimental sensibilities of its day.

In no place more than the chapter entitled “Concrete Poetry” can we see just how far that engagement went. In this chapter, Veloso mentions how a piece of criticism he wrote as a polemic on popular music (in which he had “insisted on the importance of João Gilberto and advocated a “return to the evolutionary line” the latter represented”(133)) caught the attention of the concrete poet Augusto de Campos.<sup>v</sup> Campos responded to Veloso’s article by publishing an article entitled “A Good Word on Popular Music” in which he “greeted [Veloso’s] arrival on the MPB scene as an auspicious event,” thereby launching a fruitful artistic alliance that would impact the progress and the thinking of the *tropicalistas*. The concretists expanded the range of *tropicalismo’s* artistic references<sup>vi</sup>, and in doing this they also expanded the scope of their artistic activity and made them, particularly Veloso, more aware of their engagement with that “return to the evolutionary line” that they were striving for. They were the first, for instance, to link *tropicalismo’s* musical experimentations to the poetry of the Provençal troubadours.<sup>vii</sup> This juxtaposition was not only intended as a way of highlighting the position in which the *tropicalistas* stood as a new poetic phase in the historical evolution of an exciting incarnation of a national musical tradition. It also yoked their songwriting techniques to the larger and more foundational modernist poetic tradition of “the art of combining words & sound, as Augusto [de Campos] explained the Provençal “motz el som” in [Ezra] Pound” (143). The concretists, with their vast erudition and competence in matters of artistic discernment gave the *tropicalistas* the confidence that assured them of their historical mission to revitalize and continue the development of the “evolutionary line” of popular Brazilian music (MPB), and this confidence allowed the *tropicalistas*, in large measure, to overcome some of the insecurities they faced in confronting their professed task of contributing to the revitalization of MPB. Near the end of the chapter, Veloso expresses some doubt over whether his emergence on the musical scene had been occasioned by “a drop in the demand in quality that [he] helped to create”? It is the answer to this question that demonstrates the concretists’ true significance to the success of the *tropicalista’s* artistic project, and it does so in terms that, once again, ground them in a larger, deeper modernist aesthetic: “Augusto at times used to say that Erik Satie, who could not compete with Debussy in harmonic invention, chose instead to turn the music inside out. And he concluded that, by the same token, the *tropicalistas* had opted for the inside out of bossa nova” (144)<sup>viii</sup>.

Operating in a field of musical activity dominated by technical songwriting mastery on one side (bossa nova) and fashionable incursions into mainstream musical genres on the other (*Jovem Guarda*), the *tropicalistas* chose to both trust supremely in the wellspring of their native musical traditions as well as have faith in a future that would extend the “evolutionary line” of that tradition into the sphere of an international musical culture. Beneath all the political wrangling and artistic maneuvering the movement had to go through in its attempts to articulate a higher ground for MPB to stand on, lay two vitally critical impulses. The first one is love. The *tropicalistas* exhibited a deep love for their musical tradition, a love that would not allow them to instrumentalize that tradition into a communitarian tool of national self-identification and thus limit its sphere of artistic influence. Both the connection they made with

the wellspring of their musical tradition (namely the “return to the evolutionary line”) and the reassigned role they gave to it in framing their artistic advancement in a globally-minded pop music industry implied promising new possibilities for a country that, since its very inception, had struggled to grab hold of its own sense of cultural agency. The second impulse behind the *tropicalista* project is trust. In submitting to *the historical fact of Brazil*, to the sum of its colonial humiliations, cultural infantilisms, and artistic insularity, the *tropicalistas* were able to claim what was most quintessential in the making of their uniquely Brazilian identity. Resigning themselves to the evolutionary line traced by their cultural emergence out of the historical shadow of their colonial past was predicated on an act of faith. They trusted in the historical legitimacy of their relatively short-lived and heavily burdened cultural legacy. They trusted in the trajectories of their musical tradition, and in the ability of these trajectories to feed directly into the definition of a modern Brazilian sensibility. In the final reckoning, this might be the most enduring lesson in Caetano Veloso’s *Tropical Truth*: without the investment of love and trust in tradition, there can be little hope for the future.

## ADDENDUM

*...the old that was once new is as new as the newest of the new.*

- Caetano Veloso, *Tropical Truth: A Story of Music and Revolution in Brazil*

The story of *tropicalismo* is instructive because it models a useful conversation *with* tradition. The *tropicalistas* did not conduct the conversation in the manner of a Socratic dialogue, with tradition officiating the terms of the conversation. Instead they entered into that conversation as if it was a prayer. They sought resonances for their creative artistic production in the music on which their language, their culture, and their history were nourished. When Caetano Veloso speaks of an “evolutionary line,” he is in fact hinting at something much more revolutionary than just the evolution of Brazilian music along a progressive spectrum. He is hinting at a musical genome, at a conception of musical tradition (and tradition in general) in which progress is no more than the articulation of a central ontology. This central ontology grows with each new utterance, thickens with divergent trajectories that weave in and out of unison, digests foreign elements into its DNA, and continues to exert a subaltern influence of mythic proportions. This central ontology is tradition.

It is that vision of tradition that emerges from Veloso’s discussion of cultural anthropophagy. After having been reintroduced by the concretists to the Brazilian modernist poet, Oswald de Andrade, Veloso singles out Andrade’s *Manifesto Antropófago* (Cannibal Manifesto), which argues that “Brazilians should not imitate but rather devour new information from wherever it comes,”<sup>ix</sup> and which Veloso credits for seeking “a rediscovery of and a new foundation for Brazil”(155). This understanding of progress, or the project of modernity, based on establishing a cultural continuum, echoes Veloso’s championing of João Gilberto as the model for the artistic advancement of MPB. Andrade’s manifesto expands the scope of Brazil’s cultural identification by recasting the historical moment in which Brazil was transitioning from its free indigenous existence into its post-lapsarian colonized subjugation, and in positing an

indigenous gesture of resistance, namely anthropophagy<sup>x</sup>, as a uniquely Brazilian metaphor for cultural self-definition. In so doing, he extends the timeline of Brazil's cultural continuum farther back into its non-colonial history at the same time as suggesting richer more varied potentialities for Brazil as that continuum moves forward. What João Gilberto had managed to do musically, Andrade had laid the ground for philosophically, and this reaffirmed Veloso and the rest of the *tropicalistas* in their resolve:

There are few moments in our cultural history that can vie with Oswald [de Andrade]'s vision. As I see it, it is a decision in favor of precision rather than a panacea to solve the problem of identity in Brazil...Anthropophagy, seen in more precise terms, is a means of radicalizing the demand for identity, not a denial of the question. We were sure that João Gilberto (who, in contrast to mayonnaise-style fusions—to borrow the expression of the Italian psychoanalyst Contardo Calligaris—created a new style, definite, and fresh) was a clear example of the anthropophagist attitude. And we wanted to meet those standards. (156-7)

The cultural anthropophagy advocated by Oswald de Andrade and adopted, as an artistic principle, by the *tropicalistas* is only one representative of a conception of tradition in which the relationship between the “old that was once new” and the “newest of the new” is radically rehabilitated so as to reveal the existence of a cultural continuum. This echoes what was stated earlier in the essay as to the *quietness* inherent in the passing of tradition from one era to the next. Tradition is constantly being revealed. Hence Veloso's statement that “Stravinsky and Schoenberg seem to intend not that we stop listening to Bach in order to listen to them, but rather that we become better listeners of Bach for having listened to them” (147). It is the newness of what was once old that resonates in the newness of what is new, and as such tradition should not be understood as a movement in time. It is a movement over and above time. It is a bridge to what is timeless. This is the real power of tradition, not as a dogmatic cloud that casts itself over the present and shadows it, but rather as a prayer from another time in which it was also a prayer from another time.

## Works Cited

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<sup>i</sup> Veloso is eminently aware of this dynamic and, in the introduction to his book, prefaces his explorations into the story of the tropicalismo movement with this thought: “The parallel with the United States is inevitable. If all the countries in the world today measure themselves against “America,” position themselves in relation to the American Empire, and if the other countries in America have to do so in an even more direct way—comparing their respective histories to that of their stronger and more fortunate brother—Brazil's case is even more acute, since the mirror image is more evident and the alienation more radical. Brazil is America's other giant, the other melting

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pot of races and cultures, the other promised land to European and Asian immigrants, the Other. The double, the shadow, the negative image of the great adventure of the New World” (4).

ii Veloso appropriates this notion from Brazilian writer Antônio Cícero in his book, *O mundo desde o fim* (*The World from the End*). Veloso’s thoughts on the book’s central thrust echo his earlier thoughts (see endnote #1) on the cultural significance of Brazil’s geo-historical birth: “The book [*O mundo desde o fim*] is a radical affirmation of the modernity born with Descartes—against all the anti-Enlightenment attacks that have inspired a great deal of contemporary thinking—and it imposes on Brazil the enormous responsibility of being not the great illegible “Other” that opposes European reason, but the open space for the transition from the West to the west of the West (to paraphrase Fernando Pessoa on Mário de Sá-Carneiro)...With this book, Cícero destroys Brazil’s false choice between a strident exoticism and a modest mimicry” (287-88).

iii This can be seen particularly in Veloso’s glossas on the crystallization of João Gilberto’s distinctive bossa nova style. Through a series of explanations, clarifications, and additions, Veloso paints a deeply layered portrait of the musical journey that Bossa Nova had to travel on to arrive at its debut with João Gilberto’s fortuitous appearance on the MPB scene in 1959. In *Tropical Truth*, Veloso returns over and over again to this tracing of the musical tradition that gave rise to João Gilberto, Bossa Nova, and by extension, himself and the tropicalismo movement. The effect is one of accumulation as well as the insinuation of a depth of tradition that goes not only backwards in time, but that also implies a depth of potentialities going forward. It is not possible here to do justice to that effect, but what follows is a passage that begins to suggest the scope of Veloso’s vision: “João Gilberto took Orlando Silva—rather than Bing Crosby or Frank Sinatra, who had inspired Lúcio Alves and Dick Farney—as his model in creating a way to sing and play samba (which he did somewhat in the manner of cool-jazz singers and instrumentalists, though João himself, unlike his predecessor Johnny Alf or his successors of Beco das Garrafas, never played jazz). That he always credited Orlando as the most profound inspiration for the invention of bossa nova (in forty years, what interviews he gave were extremely rare—and always brief—but in nearly all of them he mentioned Orlando Silva)—all this, taken together with the fact that Orlando was at once a mass phenomenon and an artist of the utmost refinement, made him a key point of reference for anyone who sought to address the issue of art for the masses and at the same time meet the challenge of bossa nova” (165).

iv In singling out Chico Buarque as of a minority of bossanovistas that was continuing to work on extending that “evolutionary line” inherent in MPB, Veloso doesn’t fail to hand down his verdict on the group of musicians who were, at that time, carrying the banner for MPB: “Chico held on to the purity of that line, showing no tendency toward superficial trendiness, whether that be the Beco das Garrafas or that of the Arena shows” (143).

v “Augusto and his brother Haroldo, together with Décio Pignatari, formed the nucleus of a group of poets who, in the mid-fifties, launched the concrete poetry movement, a radical renewal of the modernist spirit of the twenties. These poets took a stand against the propriety of the antimodernists and anti-avant-gardists...”(136). On the next page, Veloso writes that “the level of the arguments they sustained was so high, their culture so vast, and their determination so unshakable that they became a tough bone of contention in the Brazilian intellectual milieu, commanding respect even when there was no receptivity” (137).

vi “There [Augusto de Campos’ house] we would listen to Charles Ives, Lupicínio [Rodrigues], Webern, Cage, and we would talk about the situation of Brazilian music and festivals. We, the young tropicalistas, would listen to stories about the personages involved in the dada movement, Anglo-American modernism, the Brazilian Modern Art Week, and the heroic phase of concrete poetry. We would exchange ideas with great ease, the great differences in the extent of our knowledge (to say nothing of the mental aptitude for dealing with it) never creating cause for embarrassment” (142).

vii “...the similarity signaled by Augusto, in our conversations and later in an article written in 1969, between our [tropicalistas’] and the poetry of the Provençal troubadours.” (143)



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viii This transhistorical correspondence of compositional practices seems to be a hallmark in the emergence of artistic movements. One can look, for instance, to the emergence of Cool Jazz in the U.S.A. in the late 1950s, which owes its existence to the inability of a young Miles Davis to match the speed and range of Dizzy Gillespie's playing style. "Not as technically gifted a trumpet player as Gillespie, he nevertheless had already developed a style all his own, which put the emphasis on timing, mood and choosing the right notes instead of speed and agility." (McPherson) < <http://www.timeisonourside.com/STBop.html>>

ix Veloso references Haroldo de Campos' interpretation of de Andrade's "metaphor of devouring" for further clarification: "In the words of Haroldo de Campos, this was a need "to assimilate the foreign experience into the Brazilian species, and to reinvent it on our own terms, with the ineluctable local qualities that will endow the resulting product with an autonomous character and confer on it, in principle, functionality as product for export" (156).

x "Oswald launched the myth of anthropophagy, bringing the cannibal ritual into the arena of international cultural relations. Father Pero Fernandes Sardinha's deglutition by the Indians becomes the inaugural scene of Brazilian culture, the very basis of nationality." (156)