

Collaging Culture:

*The International Impact of
Tropicália's Innovative Genre
Amalgamation*

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Despite only formally existing for a year, Brazil's Tropicália movement produced cultural shocks that resound both within the country and beyond more than fifty years later.¹ Tropicália, or Tropicalismo, was an artistic movement, manifested principally in music, that was characterized by the union of disparate cultural paradigms. Formed in the northeastern state of Bahia in 1967, the movement responded to the social and political plights engendered by Brazil's military dictatorship, rejecting both the passive nationalism of the regime and the defensive nationalism of the traditional left.² Upon moving to São Paulo, Tropicália's main constituents, Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Gal Costa, and Tom Zé, expanded their collaborative efforts, working with the psychedelic-rock band Os Mutantes and the composer Rogério Duprat. In addition to creating independent projects, the tropicalists performed and produced music together, releasing an album in 1968, *Tropicália Ou Panis et Circensis*, that served as the manifesto of the movement. However, after the ratification of Institutional Act Number Five in December of 1968, which increased media censorship, Veloso and Gil were arrested and exiled.³ As the tropicalists who remained in Brazil adopted more apolitical messages in their songs, the Tropicália movement came to a halt. Yet, the movement's brevity did not inhibit its impact. In addition to influencing subsequent generations of Brazilian musicians, Tropicália experienced a surge of popularity in the United States in the 1990s, altering the foreign perception of Brazil. Unlike any prior artistic movement, Tropicália produced a musical amalgamation that embraced both sophisticated and

unrefined elements of Brazilian culture as well as international influence. This unique collage of genres rightfully situated Brazil as a radical cultural trailblazer on the international stage. However, the global impact of Tropicalismo was somewhat hindered by the linguistic barrier created by its Portuguese lyrics, reducing the foreign perception of its complexities.

Prior to the tropicalist movement, the artistic exports that foreigners recognized as uniquely Brazilian were often drastically warped depictions of the country's culture. Carmen Miranda, a Portuguese-born Brazilian singer, dancer, Broadway actress, and film star, is perhaps the best example of these distorted representations. Gracing the screen in the United States as the "Brazilian Bombshell," Miranda served as a "vulgarized or stereotyped" emblem of Brazilian culture.⁴ Hollywood directors created an inaccurately homogenized character who was meant to epitomize not only Brazilian culture but Latin American culture as a whole. In her films, she appeared "either as herself, Carmen, or as some stereotypically Latin persona—alternately Querida, Chiquita, Chita, Marina, Carmelita, and, in four films, Rosita."⁵ Unsurprisingly, although U.S. film producers expected that their "Latin" films would appeal to audiences in South and Central America, Brazilians detested these Americanized mockeries of their country.⁶ Miranda embodied "both feminine and ethnic excess" to a degree that was considered "grotesque" by Brazilians but accurately representative of Brazil to foreigners.⁷

4 Caetano Veloso and Christopher Dunn, "The Tropicalista Rebellion," *Transition*, no. 70 (1996): 118, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2935353>.

5 Shari Roberts, "'The Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat': Carmen Miranda, a Spectacle of Ethnicity," *Cinema Journal* 32, no. 3 (1993): 8, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1225876>.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, 4.; Veloso and Dunn, "The Tropicalista Rebellion," 132.; *Ibid.*, 135.

1 Christopher Dunn, *Brutality Garden: Tropicalia and the Emergence of a Brazilian Counterculture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 65.

2 *Ibid.*, 123.

3 *Ibid.*, 146.

Well-respected Brazilian artists rebuked these distorted cultural emblems, engaging instead in a cultural exchange with artists from North America and Europe. In some cases, this cultural exchange was largely one-sided, reinforcing the notion of Brazil as a “third world” country that borrowed from more advanced nations. Musicians who considered themselves representative of Brazil’s cultural sophistication tirelessly emphasized the schism between their work and that of figures like Miranda. In 1989, for example, Elton John planned to appear on stage at Carnegie Hall wearing Miranda’s distinctive fruit headpiece during Tom Jobim’s performance of the bossa nova hit “The Girl From Ipanema.” Jobim rejected the idea, unwilling to compromise bossa nova, a “sacred music,” by placing it in conversation with a cultural distortion.⁸ While Jobim wholeheartedly spurned engaging with distortions like Miranda, he was one of the many Brazilian artists who readily integrated foreign musical influences into their work. In both bossa nova and Jovem Guarda, Brazil’s rock and roll movement of the 1960s, the influence of North American and European music was unmistakable. Bossa nova was created by musicians “who grew up absorbing American jazz through recordings,” one journalist explained.⁹ This was particularly apparent in the harmonies of bossa nova, which drew heavily from American standards. Jovem Guarda was similar in its appropriation of foreign culture, adopting the stylistic components of both American rock icons of the 1950s and the bands of the 1960s British Invasion. Roberto Carlos, one of the leaders

of Brazil’s youth rock movement, cited the tremendous impact of Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry on his work.¹⁰ Perhaps the most apparent influence on Jovem Guarda, though, was the Beatles, as the movement was initially dubbed *iê-iê-iê*, a title drawn from the distinctive “yeah yeah yeah” of the 1963 Beatles single “She Loves You.”¹¹ It is thus evident that both bossa nova and Jovem Guarda were susceptible to foreign influence. The two movements experienced different international receptions, however. While bossa nova was widely praised in the United States by 1962, influencing American jazz artists like Charlie Byrd, Jovem Guarda enjoyed little success beyond Brazilian borders. International audiences “fiirted with Brazilian exports” like bossa nova, but ultimately the cultural exchange between Brazilian artists and those from North American and Europe was unbalanced.¹²

Unlike the musicians of bossa nova and Jovem Guarda, the tropicalists ironically appropriated warped depictions of Brazilian culture, removing them from their cultural milieus in order to view them neutrally. While proponents of popular music in Brazil rejected kitsch, as it conflicted with “good musical behavior,”¹³ the members of the *Tropicália* movement embraced it.¹⁴ Describing the process of cultural reclamation in an interview with Professor Christopher Dunn, Veloso explains, “you want to bring in an object that’s culturally

8 John Lewis, “Why bossa nova is ‘the highest flowering of Brazilian culture,’” *The Guardian*, October 1, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/01/bossa-nova-highest-culture-brazil>.

9 John S. Wilson, “Brazil’s Bossa Nova Spreading,” *New York Times*, September 27, 1962, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/times-machine/1962/09/27/90886997.html?pageNumber=32>.

10 Larry Rohter, “Songs by a Man With Heart Mean Christmas in Brazil,” *New York Times*, December 24, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/24/arts/songs-by-a-man-with-heart-mean-christmas-in-brazil.html>.

11 Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 58.

12 Charles A. Perrone, “Nationalism, Dissension, and Politics in Contemporary Brazilian Popular Music,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 39, no. 1 (2002): 66, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3513834>; Wilson, “Brazil’s Bossa Nova”; Milo Miles, “RECORDINGS VIEW; Steamy Echoes From a Sun-Drenched Genre,” *New York Times*, May 8, 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/08/arts/recordings-view-steamy-echoes-from-a-sun-drenched-genre.html?searchResultPosition=27>.

13 Veloso and Dunn, “The Tropicalista Rebellion,” 121.

14 *Ibid.*

repulsive, so you go embrace it and then you dislocate it... You start to love it... But before that, there's a moment when you arrive at that neutral point, when you become uncritical in relation to that object."¹⁵ Dunn defines the tropicalist appropriation as "pastiche,"¹⁶ an "uncritical" imitation of a work or artist. This definition, like Veloso's explanation, lacks a negative value judgment of the appropriated object. In fact, Veloso claims that he comes to "love" the "culturally repulsive" object. This remarkably positive description engenders the notion that tropicalists paid "homage to Brazilian cultural icons, such as Carmen Miranda."¹⁷ However, paying "homage" is an oversimplification of Tropicália's deft ironic appropriation. At the end of his 1968 song "Tropicália," Veloso sings:

I inaugurate the monument / on the
central high plains / of the country... The
monument of papier-mâché and silver...
The monument is quite modern / You
said nothing of my fashionable suit / To
hell with everything else / My love / Long
live the band / Long live Carmen
Miranda¹⁸

In his interview with Dunn, Veloso unravels the connection between the "monument," incongruously constructed in "papier-mâché and silver," and the creation of Brasília.¹⁹ Brasília, he describes, was built as a monument in a country where there was little to commemorate, as Brazilians were suffering from poverty under a military dictatorship. The inharmonious materials of Veloso's monument mirror the

ironically misplaced monument of Brasília. While the nod to Miranda at the end of this politically charged song might seem misplaced, Veloso meaningfully relates Miranda to both his monument and that of Brasília. Miranda is a similar amalgam of discordant cultural materials, as Hollywood films drew from Cuban, Mexican, and Argentine elements to portray her as an all-encompassing "Latin" woman.²⁰ Therefore, although the reference to Miranda in the song lacks scorn, it should not be defined as an "homage" either. Instead, the tropicalists subtly pointed to twisted representations of Brazil using thoughtful comparisons, upending the foreign recognition of these representations as culturally accurate.

In addition to adopting kitsch, the members of the Tropicália drew inspiration from the tasteful cultural elements of their Bahian roots. As the "economic, demographic, and cultural center of black Brazil,"²¹ Bahia, the "cradle"²² of the Tropicália movement, was subject to racist stereotyping from the more developed South. Brazil's uneven infrastructural development neglected Bahia,²³ creating the notion that Bahians were unqualified for the demands of modern life.²⁴ Yet, Brazilians concurrently prized Bahia, with its dazzling beaches and esteemed colonial architecture, as the center of the nation's lush tropicality.²⁵ The tropicalists sought to challenge these conceptions and thus provided a more comprehensive representation of the state's cultural activity. The members of

15 Ibid., 132.

16 Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 94.

17 Juan A. Suárez, "Jack Smith, Hélio Oiticica, Tropicalism," *Criticism* 56, no. 2 (2014): 309, <https://doi.org/10.13110/criticism.56.2.0295>.

18 Veloso and Dunn, "The Tropicalista Rebellion," 119.

19 Ibid., 130.

20 Ibid., 132.

21 Davitt Sigerson, "Djavan Brings Brazil to the World," *New York Times*, July 1, 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/07/01/arts/djavan-brings-brazil-to-the-world.html?searchResultPosition=33>.

22 Jon Pareles, "Review/Pop: Moving to the Beat of Bahia And Tropicalia Connections," *New York Times*, January 4, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/01/04/arts/review-pop-moving-to-the-beat-of-bahia-and-tropicalia-connections.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

23 Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 45.

24 Ibid., 49.

25 Ibid.

the Tropicália movement championed Afro-Brazilian rights and cultural heritage, using African and Afro-Brazilian rhythms in their music.²⁶ Simultaneously, they emphasized Bahia's modernity. Gil both discussed the issues of Salvador's underdevelopment and emphasized its similarities to other Brazilian cities.²⁷ In doing so, the tropicalists advocated for the betterment of Bahia while reinforcing its already existing excellence. This, combined with their ironic appropriation of cultural distortions, provided perhaps the most accurate depiction of Brazil to date. The tropicalists both brought underrepresented elements of Brazilian culture to the foreground and undermined past misrepresentations of the country.

Once their music was replete with both distorted and authentic elements of Brazilian culture, the tropicalists incorporated foreign influences into their art, making their cultural presentation even more intricate. Veloso was forthright in proclaiming these influences. During the Tropicália movement, he absorbed the writing of Jean-Paul Sartre and the movies of Jean-Luc Godard. He consumed music from British and American artists like the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, and James Brown.²⁸ This foreign cultural consumption was apparent in the music of Tropicália. The "tape-edited interactions between orchestral music and rock"²⁹ on Gil's 1968 eponymous album, for instance, are evocative of the Beatles' 1967 Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. On Tropicália Ou Panis et Circensis, they used both "Amazon jungle drums and electric guitars,"³⁰ which at the time were associated

strongly with the rock music of North America and Europe. The tropicalists also embodied foreign elements in their dress, wearing bright tunics, clothing reminiscent of San Francisco hippies, and leather jackets in the style of the Black Panthers.³¹ Taking after the Beatles and other rock icons, they grew their hair long.³² The tropicalists were enthusiastic about incorporating international elements into their rich presentations of Brazilian culture.

The coalescence of Brazilian and foreign elements, and particularly English-speaking media, challenging the established notion of *Brasilidade*, or Brazilianness.³³ This divergence from the Brazilian cultural norm drew criticism. One journalist at the Brazilian news publication *Última Hora* wrote, "It's necessary to establish a parallel between the work of the young tropicalists and the English original. The Beatles demonstrate more clearly their creative impulses."³⁴ Brazilian theater practitioner Augusto Boal concurred, writing that there was an "absence of lucidity"³⁵ in the music of Tropicália. These critics recognized the "parallel[s]" between the tropicalists and their English and American counterparts. Instead of applauding this cultural flow, however, they considered it convoluted. Yet, the tropicalists were steadfast in their creative choices. They recognized that some form of foreign "conquest" through media was inevitable, and they thus chose to conquer "things in [their] own way, working with what [they had]."³⁶

Ultimately, the tropicalists approached their craft with sincerity, using the mismatched cultural elements that appealed to them without apprehension about how this might affect

26 Sigerson, "Djavan Brings Brazil."

27 Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 69.

28 Veloso and Dunn, "The Tropicalista Rebellion," 116.

29 Ben Ratliff, "MUSIC: Origins of a Brazilian Original," *New York Times*, May 9, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/09/arts/music-origins-of-a-brazilian-original.html?searchResultPosition=41>.

30 Miles, "RECORDINGS VIEW."

31 Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 133.

32 Veloso and Dunn, "The Tropicalista Rebellion," 122.

33 Suárez, "Jack Smith," 297.

34 Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 82-83.

35 *Ibid.*, 83.

36 Veloso and Dunn, "The Tropicalista Rebellion," 130.

the exportability or popularity of their music. Although they recognized that their art was a product for mass consumption,³⁷ the members of the Tropicália movement were not focused on international success.³⁸ The purposeful dissonance of their music,³⁹ created by the combination of kitsch, sophisticated Brazilian elements, and foreign influence, differed greatly from the sonic cohesion of internationally successful genres, like bossa nova. Veloso therefore neither thought that tropicalist music would be “exportable”⁴⁰ nor devoted energy to making it so. This lack of preoccupation with accolades allowed Tropicalismo to flourish in its most creatively complex form. Had the tropicalists allowed international success to factor into their experimental decision-making, the authenticity of their music would have been tainted.

Remarkably, the tropicalists’ lack of concern for commercial success created a musical genre that was unlike anything previously exported from Brazil, allowing the movement to flourish internationally. David Byrne, the songwriter, singer, and guitarist of the art-rock band Talking Heads, played a foundational role in the international dissemination of Tropicália. Byrne recounts, “I found these records from an earlier period, Tom Zé and others, that were radical but not abrasive or ugly—which, with my Northern or European understanding, is what I guess I assumed ‘radical’ music had to be.”⁴¹ Byrne quickly proclaimed his affinity for tropicalist music; in 1989, Luaka Bop, his record label, released *Beleza Tropical*, a compilation that included songs from Veloso, Gil, and

Costa.⁴² By the late 1990s, most tropicalist albums were sold on CD in the United States and Europe.⁴³ Despite the spatial and temporal separation between Brazil in the 1960s and the United States in the 1990s, Tropicalismo was strikingly relevant. Many tropicalist techniques, such as genre superimposition, ironic appropriation, and musical recycling,⁴⁴ were only just becoming popular in the United States. Unlike some of their 1960s Anglophone counterparts, who displayed “the self-conscious composure of a model in a formal portrait,”⁴⁵ the tropicalists possessed a natural confidence. Neither quaint nor nostalgic,⁴⁶ one American critic called Tropicália “as modern as pop gets.”⁴⁷ This modernity allowed foreign audiences to understand Brazil as a place capable of producing prodigious innovation. Tropicalist music not only matched trends in 1990s American pop culture but also preceded them. Tropicália’s bold creative choices thus made it a “harbinger”⁴⁸ of 1990s music.

Subsequently, the music of Tropicália influenced the work of celebrated artists in the United States, further exemplifying the movement’s international creative impact. Beck, for instance, who is widely regarded as one of the most idiosyncratically creative artists of the 1990s, released an album called *Mutants*, after *Os Mutantes*, in 1998. The album borrowed from Tropicália’s collage-style, sampling some

37 Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 123.

38 Suárez, “Jack Smith,” 309.

39 Suárez, “Jack Smith,” 309.

40 Veloso and Dunn, “The Tropicalista Rebellion,” 127.

41 Gerald Marzorati, “Tropicalia, Agora,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 25, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/25/magazine/tropicalia-agora.html>.

42 Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 202.

43 *Ibid.*, 203.

44 *Ibid.*

45 Ratliff, “MUSIC.”

46 *Ibid.*

47 Ben Ratliff, “POP/JAZZ; From Brazil, the Echoes Of a Modernist Revolt,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/17/arts/pop-jazz-from-brazil-the-echoes-of-a-modernist-revolt.html?searchResultPosition=3>.

48 Jon Pareles, “Hits, Live Albums and Compilations; Musical Merry-Making, From Raunchy to Reverent,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/17/movies/hits-live-albums-and-compilations-musical-merry-making-from-raunchy-to-reverent-937754.html?searchResultPosition=10>.

of the movement's samba rhythms.⁴⁹ Both Chicago's post-rock band Tortoise and New York's trip-hop band Cibo Matto sampled Tom Zé's music.⁵⁰ In the summer of 2000, the indie rock band Portastatic released an EP of covers of Brazilian music, including some tropicalists songs.⁵¹ Even Kurt Cobain, the frontman of Nirvana, returned from a 1993 tour of Brazil with Os Mutantes records.⁵² These musicians, influenced by the incredible innovations of Tropicália, in turn, informed the next generation of rock and pop in the United States. Though short lived, tropicalist music has had lasting impacts on generations of music created abroad.

Yet, because so much of the artistic and political expression of tropicalist songs lay in their Portuguese lyrics, international audiences were unable to grasp their full complexity. Many of the songs on 1968's seminal *Tropicália Ou Panis et Circensis* illustrated the adept lyricism of the tropicalists. In "Baby," Gal Costa sings about all of the things her listener "needs" to do, like "eat an ice cream" and "know about the swimming pool." While this may seem apolitical, Costa's ironic use of the word "need" in reference to frivolous tasks points to the consumerism and complacency of the Brazilian middle class.⁵³ The title of the song "Panis et Circenses" is a reference to a statement by the satirical poet Juvenal, who disdainfully alleged that the ancient Roman masses could be manipulated using just "bread and circus."⁵⁴ Accordingly, Os Mutantes sing:

I set free the tigers and the lions in
backyards / But the people in the dining

room / Are busy being born and dying
/ I ordered that a knife be made, of pure
shiny steel / To kill my love, and I killed...
/ At 5 o'clock, on the Central Avenue /
But the people in the dining room / Are
busy being born and dying⁵⁵

The song's narrator tries to rouse the people "in the dining room," the bourgeoisie, from their stagnancy and complacency. The task is clearly urgent, as the singer sets free tigers and lions and kills their lover on the "Central Avenue." Yet, these attempts are in vain, as the middle class is "busy being born and dying." Of course, birth and death are the universal aspects of every person's life. That these middle-class people are so easily distracted by these ubiquitous experiences suggests the hopelessness of making them aware of the state of the world outside of their comfortable milieu. In the context of Brazil in 1968, this suggests the bourgeoisie's unwillingness to confront the atrocious realities of the military dictatorship. In their lyrics, the tropicalists acknowledged the appeal of "the new world of plastics, glossy commodities, and colorful banality,"⁵⁶ yet condemned the tendency to be so easily allured by this new world. For an English-speaking listener, this overarching message would be lost. Thus, most foreign listeners could not fully appreciate the intricacies of tropicalist music.

Luckily, though, many of the greatest enchantments of Tropicália were musical, and the movement was thus still stirring for fans of alternative music abroad. As one American journalist expounded, the songs of Tropicalismo contained "shocking superimpositions" with "blaring horn sections... sitting on top of indigenous folk rhythms... the closest pop music

49 Marzorati, "Tropicalia, Agora."
50 Ibid.
51 Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 204.
52 Ratliff, "POP/JAZZ."
53 Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 109.
54 Ibid.

55 Victoria Broadus, "Panis et Circenses," *Lyrical Brazil*, January 9, 2012, <https://lyricalbrazil.com/2012/01/09/panis-et-circenses/>.
56 Suárez, "Jack Smith," 309

ever came to the restless esthetic prowling of a Godard film.”⁵⁷ The tropicalist “superimposition” of diverse musical genres enabled foreigners to understand the movement’s creative proximity to renowned artists, like Godard. Despite the lamentable incomprehensibility of Tropicália’s Portuguese lyrics to foreigners, it is evident that the movement remained acutely impactful abroad.

The Tropicália movement broadened the foreign perception of Brazil by epitomizing the country’s ability to produce pioneering cultural movements. Despite linguistic barriers to its reception, Tropicalismo influenced musicians both domestically and internationally. Moreover, although Tropicália ended officially at the end of 1968, tropicalist musicians have continued to collaborate, producing an abundance of music that draws from the tenets of the original movement. In 1993, for example, Veloso and Gil released *Tropicália 2*, an album with politically charged lyrics akin to those of *Tropicália Ou Panis et Circensis*. The influence of Tropicália endures.

57 Ratliff, “MUSIC.”

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