

**Dorival Caymmi and the non-ephemeral possibilities  
of popular art: a discussion of Antonio Riserio's  
*Caymmi: uma utopia de lugar*<sup>1</sup>**

Dorival Caymmi is a less obscure figure to North Americans than might be thought, for he was one of the creative musical forces behind Carmen Miranda - that Portuguese-born, Hollywood mythologized zany Latin-Lover-Lady with exotic fruit growing out of her hat. When the music is over one might well wonder just what that head-gear is all about. As the litany of Aphrodisian paraphernalia above suggest, the *Bahiana* (a street vendor of savory Afro-Brazilian cuisine and a practitioner of the *Candomblé* cult in Salvador) is truly a sassy specimen, but also the exemplar of a characteristically animist liminality between sensuous vivacity and an aesthetically codified and finessed religious praxis, for the last word of the song evokes the holiest shrine of Bahian religious syncretism, the cathedral of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim. Whatever it is the *Bahiana* has, it's part of what it takes to participate in the devotional ritual of visiting this house of Jesus and his ambivalent twin, the supreme Afro-Brazilian *orixá*, Oxalá.

The *Bahianas* heads are adorned with turbans, earrings and so on. The idea of a fruit bowl is, in fact, probably derived - through an ignorant but imaginatively meandering imagination - from the sight of the *Bahiana* as she walks to or from her *ponto*, the spot on the sidewalk where she sets up to sell her food to the public. The key piece of

equipment is a metal half-sphere - a cooking pot in the shape of a bowl - in which *acarajé*, balls of ground white beans, are fried in *azeite-de-dendê* ("palm oil" in English; it has a role in coastal Bahian and some West African cuisine similar to that of olive oil in the Mediterranean). During transportation on foot, the *Bahiana* bears the pot loaded with edibles on her head in the traditional manner, with or without the leverage of a steadying hand. Hollywood's image of the fruit cocktail scalp is a sort of semiotic lobotomy, reducing the spectacle to the lowest common tropical cultural denominator of luscious fruit. Similarly, the character type of the *Bahiana* is reducible from the cosmivision of the religious initiate to that "fruity dame", Hollywood's Carmen .

The Carmen Miranda icon stands for a story of cultural translation, a communicative bridge between two radically divergent subjectivities - Bahia and Hollywood - to both of which Carmen herself was alien. The problematics of the diverse points along this semiotic axis need not be studied from the usual viewpoint - the external reception and semiotic distortion of the indigenous motif in the bazaar of the modern market, or even the reverse (the appropriation and semiotic re-elaboration of modern paraphernalia by indigenous cultures, often studied by anthropologists). *Caymmi: uma utopia de lugar* is not about the signification clash between two separately located cultures. It describes an artistic procedure of conscious aesthetic and moral selection within a provincial society. Antonio Riserio's study of Dorival Caymmi, the most popular mid-century composer from Bahia in Brazil's old North-East, has little to do with Caymmi's professional career and even less to do with Carmen Miranda's floral apotheosis North of the Equator. It addresses rather the question of the cultural roots which lie at the bottom of this fantastical extrapolation, the question, within the

varied world of Brazilian civilization, of the cultural identity of the region around the venerable city of Salvador known as the Recôncavo da Bahia.

Riserio himself is a highly original and somewhat singular essayist on the question of the broader intellectual implications of Bahian popular culture. The *carnaval* of Salvador has undergone an afro-centric renaissance in the last twenty years, of extraordinary aesthetic creativity but also armed with a vivid social rhetoric of *conscientização* - consciousness raising. The landmark and still almost solitary intellectual explication of this movement is Riserio's *Carnaval Ijexá*. Riserio, by auto definition a poet and anthropologist, was particularly qualified to write this work. Bahian by birth but educated at university level in São Paulo under the tutelage of Haroldo de Campos, leader of the *concretistas* (Brazil's pioneering post-modern literary vanguard) Riserio returned to his home state permanently and participated actively as a lyricist with several early *afro-blocos* (aesthetically Afro-centric, socially Afro-Bahian or Afro-Brazilian centric *carnaval* clubs).

Riserio's literary and anthropological orientation bring a fresh perspective to the appreciation of a popular singer; there is minimal attention to discographies, career highs and lows, family tragedies and so on, in short, the biographical and bureaucratic dissection of someone whose public life experience has acquired an aura. The concern is to discern the communal cultural reality evoked by the composer and to analyze the selective processes he has used, that is, to interpret the cultural ideology inherent in that subjective evocation of places and characters from the Bahian human landscape.

Caymmi's own *modus vivendi* validates this method. In the 1930s Caymmi made his way from Salvador to a radio station in Rio, then the

undisputed capital of Brazilian musical culture and also the recording industry center. It was the time of a new generation of exceptionally talented song-writers and an explosion in mass consumption, facilitated through records and national radio, of a new type of popular music based on Rio samba. Caymmi's composition "*O Que É Que a Bahiana Tem*" (What the *Bahiana* has) was adapted at the last minute as a vehicle for a Carmen Miranda film with folkloric Bahian themes. This firmly established her aesthetic persona, which, though arbitrary in the Brazilian context, with her translation to Broadway and Hollywood became the substance of her entire career.

The persona was based on a fusion of two distinct feminine Bahian stereotypes: the sensual, hot-tempered, samba-prancing young mulatto woman<sup>2</sup>, and the traditional *Bahiana*, often well beyond the flowering of youth and not infrequently impressively stout, whose ceremonial clothes (a complexity of long white lace petticoats, beads, a cloth bound around the head) have come to constitute the folkloric costume of Bahia. Miranda's signature tune, within Brazil at least, is a meditation upon the charms of this cuisine and by implication its gracious servers. In other words, the process of Hollywoodization, that is, the appropriation and re-invention of the symbolic apparatus and connotations of a given sub-culture by an outsider for the purpose of mass consumption begins well before Carmen Miranda leaves Brazil.

If Miranda was able to appropriate and secularize the *Bahiana* persona by singing Caymmi's song, what happened to the composer? Did he, in reciprocal fashion, respond to the opportunity of the capitalist metropolis just as the star singer had recognized the provincial appeal of the women and the community evoked in the Bahian's repertoire? Despite the successful development of his career, Caymmi

did not ultimately gravitate to the industrial center - he did not become an integrated part of the Rio community of celebrities as so many Europeans and American Easterners have done in Hollywood. He maintained his family base in Salvador (a decision reversed by his famous children, Nana and Dori Caymmi, major artists in their own right, who left Salvador for Rio and Los Angeles) and maintained the focus of his subject matter on a sociologically particular and technologically archaic sub-group of the coastal economy: the fishermen who venture out each day in flimsy barques. With time, Caymmi has acquired a respect amongst Bahian artists which borders on religious reverence. The great contemporary composer and singer Gilberto Gil concretized this reverence in his most recent CD with a song about Caymmi called "Buddha Nagô" (*nagô* being one of the Yoruba sub-nations represented in the Afro-Brazilian cult called *Candomblé*). Caymmi avoids most interviews and is known for a relatively un-Bahian laconic asperity. This elusiveness has only added to his mystique.

For all the lively playfulness and sensuality, there are always reminders in his lyrics of the harsh conditions of survival upon which the bravado of his characters is predicated, and overt suggestions of the animist religious structures which give meaning to their experience:

Pescador quando sai  
Nunca sabe se volta  
nem sabe se fica...  
Quanta gente perdeu  
seus maridos, seus filhos  
nas ondas do mar...<sup>3</sup>

(When the fisherman goes out / Never knows if he will return  
 / nor even if he will remain .../ How many people have lost /  
 their husbands or their sons / in the waves of the sea...)

Caymmi, then, is a man of wisdom and displays a deep respect for popular wisdom. He is a sage, and if he has achieved a sort of canonization in Bahian art even though he is still alive, it is not simply because of the creative genius in his songs but also because of his own place in the city. The book includes an apparently casual, but precious photo; Caymmi stands at a corner in the old city, the "religious city" as Jorge Amado likes to call Salvador; he is bare-chested except for the beads which indicate to the initiated his particular affiliation with the gods, or "saints" of *Candomblé*. His hands are opened out before him, symmetrically, and his face bears an expression of some urgency. It is very likely that he is gesticulating, making a point in some worldly discussion, that he is about to go quench his thirst. But it looks for all the world as though he is, if not possessed, at least praying, addressing the saints. Caymmi is the song-writer of Bahia, just as Jorge Amado is its storyteller. If Jorge Amado has greater stature amongst European audiences it is partly because writers ultimately hold greater power in that tradition; but in Bahia, a land of oral culture, these priorities are reversed.

As Riserio observes, despite their shared ideas, mutual admiration and friendship, to fully understand the peculiarities of Caymmi's chosen referential universe it is useful to contrast these two grand old men of the Bahian mid-century cultural renaissance. For Amado, committed communist and citizen of a European-dominated world, his ardent attachment to his home people and their cultural traditions is

intertwined in his work with subtle or overt references to conventional Marxist political theory. Thus, in *Jubiabá*, the wisdom of the aged *candomblereiro* is ultimately revealed as an inadequate force to summons the workers to the needful strike; popular religion can be read here in a conventional Marxist sense as a form of alienation. In *Gabriela*, Amado mixes his own nostalgia for the economic and cultural burgeoning of the southern Bahian towns of Ilhéus and Itabuna during the heyday of the revolution in cocoa farming, but this is situated, in fact, within a particular political prism: the Stalinist theory of gradual but necessary stages in the development of capitalism which would lead to implosion and socialist recuperation.

Caymmi, however, is remarkably restrictive. The ideological perspective does not stray beyond the rich but archaic tapestry of popular credence. As Riserio points out, Caymmi is similarly exclusive in the choice of popular community privileged as subject matter, for amongst the many trades, situations and circumstances within the popular classes of Bahia, it is the fishermen and the various personages in contact with them (including *Bahianas*, wives and assorted lovers) who dominate his attention and his imagination. It is as though the composer, a man of letters who can not be cast as a musical fisherman, has deliberately defined his referential limitations. It is interesting to make the parallel to certain Spanish-American writers who create their own referential realm and work their texts within it, such as the Macondo of García-Márquez. What is singular about Caymmi's chosen world, the fishing community of the Recôncavo, is that it is a tangible reality in Salvador even today, even if the archetypal Caymmian community, Itapoãn, has by now been engulfed in the urban swell of metropolitan Salvador.

What makes this real community an "Utopia de lugar" ("Utopian place") for Riserio is that in focusing on the fishing community, who use the same vessels - *jangadas* (rafts) and canoes with sails - as have always been used since the non-indigenous settlement of Brazil - Caymmi has deliberately circumvented the question of modernization as a sociological reality. Whereas the Rio visited by Caymmi from the '30s onwards was a rapidly industrializing city, as was Salvador from the late fifties on, Caymmi's chosen cast is living a pre-industrial reality. Of course, even without massive industrialization, from a much earlier period, the late nineteenth century say, Salvador was transformed through the processes of technological modernization of infrastructure, services and cultural consumption. Many of the city's workers found themselves performing non-traditional tasks and devoting their leisure time to imported diversions and new satisfactions. But unlike most composers of the time from Bahia or from Rio, Caymmi has cut off his cast of characters from the intrusions of the modern and the culturally alien.

Despite Salvador's status as the nation's capital for most of the first three hundred years of the post-Colombian society, for Riserio, the Recôncavo da Bahia only developed a distinct sub-culture in the last one hundred and fifty years, i.e. after it had ceded national leadership to Rio and entered a long phase of economic eclipse. With the declining sugar plantation culture now dominated by other North-eastern states, the development of agriculture and industry in the South, and the political isolation of the Bahian elite, the one sector of the economy which developed was that devoted to specialist services and trade, notably the trade with the West Coast of Africa which brought slaves to Brazil till the 1860s and took tobacco and other substances back to

Benin. This effected a steady supply of African forced immigration dominated ethnically by Sudanese (West African) groups including the various Yoruba-speaking peoples, in contrast to the earlier predominance of Bantu-speaking peoples from South-west Africa.

Riserio's theory is that it is precisely this period of relative isolation from the modernizing South of Brazil and Europe, and of steady human traffic with the urbanized cultures of the West African Gulf which spawned the unique cultural ambient of the Recôncavo da Bahia. The question of Yoruba versus Bantu influence in Afro-Brazilian culture has emerged as more and more is done on the details and distinctions between elements of the Afro-Brazilian heritage deriving from different indigenous African peoples. Much work remains to be done to explain the contrasts between the Afro-Brazilian heritage in the Recôncavo and in other areas dominated predominantly by Brazilians of African descent, such as São Luis and Alagoas.

Riserio provides an historical sketch of Bahia to explain his perspective, which is based, in fact, on those of several distinguished local scholars including various members of the "Bahian school" of socio-anthropology (Nina Rodrigues, Edson Carneiro, Vivaldo da Costa e Lima) and the ex-patriot French Bahian, Pierre Verger - photographer, *Candomblé* priest and scholar - perhaps the single most knowledgeable student of Bahian-West African cultural contacts. However, Riserio remains a poet and his own most solid intellectual base is literary. Caymmi's aesthetic project is analyzed with Riserio's usual perspicacity and versatility in terms of the ideological and stylistic underpinnings of various streams of modernism. The comparison with the work of Jorge Amado has been mentioned, but most of Riserio's points of reference in fact derive from European modernism, and in this sense the

book can be read with interest by non-Brazilians unfamiliar with Caymmi's oeuvre.

One of the chapters of *Caymmi : uma utopia de lugar*, written in partnership with a musicologist, Tuzé de Abreu, analyses a song simply entitled "O Mar" ("The Sea"), which tells the tale of a much-loved fisherman who drowns one night at sea<sup>4</sup>. It attempts a close semiotic reading of, on the one hand, chordal arrangements and rhythms and, on the other, the dramatic structures articulated through the careful disposition of the verses and the grammatical roles of nouns and verbs. Here Riserio is evidently writing under the influence of the brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, whose central poetic and theoretical authority is Ezra Pound; the Campos have utilized Pound's studies of the lyrical integration of word and music in the work of the Provençal troubadours (as Riserio himself indicates, the notion of *motz e.l son* [132])<sup>5</sup>. Riserio notes a series of rhetorical devices which, if accepted, completely belie the assumption of naiveté in the construction of the popular song. The critic argues that the initial verse, "*O mar, quando quebra na praia, é bonito*", serves as a sort of superstructural paradigm of the ever-present powerful immensity of the sea, within which is inscribed the human drama subsequently related in the song. The infinity of the sea is suggested through a slight dragging on the open vowel and the (characteristically Bahian) dropping of the final in the word *mar*. He also notes that *quando* contains an anagram of the key word *onda*. In the succession *quebra na praia*, Riserio discerns that these "fonemas oclusivos, seguidos de vibrante e vogal aberta, de certa forma reproduz o baque das ondas na beira do mar" (133; "[these] occlusive phonemes, followed by the voiced fricative liquid and the open vowel, reproduce in a manner the crashing sound of the waves on the seashore"). One is

indeed tempted to follow Riserio's lead here, for the same simple line in fact presents a rapid triple or quadruple assonance (*quebra na praia*) in addition to the alliteration of *Quando quebra*. This initial natural paradigm, reiterated at the end of the song, and marked by a rhythmic and harmonic character distinct from that of the enclosed tale, is the aesthetic and contextual frame for the dramatic narrative within, presented in five stanzas:

Pedro vivia da pesca / saía no barco / seis horas da tarde / só  
vinha na hora do sol raiá //

Todos gostavam de Pedro / e mais do que todos / Rosinha de  
Chica / a mais bonitinha / e mais bem feitinha / de todas  
mocinha / lá do arraiá //

Pedro saiu no seu barco / seis horas da tarde / passou toda a  
noite / não veio na hora / do sol raiá //

Deram com o corpo de Pedro / jogado na praia / roído por  
peixe / sem barco, sem nada / num canto bem longe / lá do  
arraiá //

Pobre Rosinha de Chica / que era bonita / agora parece / que  
endoideceu: / vive na beira da praia / olhando pras ondas /  
andando... rondando... / dizendo baixinho / morreu... morreu...  
/ morreu... oh... //<sup>6</sup>

(1. Pedro was a fisherman; / he would go out in his boat / at six  
in the evening / and only get back at daybreak. // 2. Everyone  
loved Pedro, / most of all / Rosinha da Chica, / the most  
beautiful / and delightfully made / of all the girls / from that  
village. // 3. Pedro went out on his boat / at six in the evening;

/ he spent the whole night, / he didn't come when / the sun  
 came up. // 4. They found Pedro's body / thrown up on the  
 beach / and chewed by the fishes, / no boat, no nothing. / at a  
 spot far / from that village. // 5. Poor Rosinha da Chica / who  
 once was pretty / now looks like / she went crazy; / she lives  
 at the seashore / staring at the waves, / going round... and  
 round... / quietly saying, / "He died... he died... / He died...")  
 (possible punctuation added)

There is not room in this essay for a further account of Riserio's explication of Caymmi's poetic enrichments of the perennial tragic scene of man defeated by the sea. We can simply underline the exciting innovative possibilities of such a method, firstly in the versatility with which it surveys the fused musical and linguistic text (*motz e.l son*). Riserio's study alerts us to a surprising academic disciplinary (or, more to the point, interdisciplinary) circumstance: there is almost no critical methodological apparatus for the analysis of the word in music (the "musicalized word", the "song word"?).<sup>7</sup>

But there is another important point here, raised by Riserio's extraordinary capacity to move at a theoretical level between notions of "high" art and the popular, and to apply the analytic tools of the former to the latter. Given that a limited number of popular artists produce work which becomes classic and which is, at an undefined level of artistic efficacy, more accomplished than much "high" art, but which tends to be excluded from the academic critic's view because of its origin, there is a great need for analysis of the stylistic devices developed through the popular artists' intuitions. In no country more than Brazil, perhaps, is the issue of the aesthetic value of popular culture

more important, given that there is a great imbalance between the contributions to the world by this civilization at the levels of popular and erudite artistic production; Brazilian erudite culture is, *grosso modo*, Euro-centric and derivative, whereas in the ecumenical gathering of the *carnaval* it has come to virtually define the sublimation of popular aesthetic experience. Riserio has contributed to this relatively unexplored area. But he has gone further, also, by tying in stylistic analysis with the whole question of cultural identity, seeking the links between the aesthetic genre and the subjacent ideological affirmation, between the musicological and the mythological repertoires which, fusing over ever-shifting boundaries, constitute the culture of a community.

We have seen that to understand the signification code so brilliantly confused by Carmen Miranda it is necessary to trace back through the stylistic elements and their semiotic traces. To understand Brazil also, it is necessary to trace back through the kaleidoscope of signs presented in the extravaganza of the *carnaval* of Rio - the spectacle which informs most outsiders of the supposed cultural reality of the country. And in this semiotic domain, it will be found that not all, but most roads lead to Salvador, the "Black Rome" of the Americas. Rather than telling the story of the movement of a talented composer from the margin to the center of modernized cultural production, Riserio has interpreted Caymmi in a story of origin which goes back beyond the composer to the roots of his native state, challenging the usual hierarchy of centers which puts the Rio/São Paulo axis at the fulcrum of the nation because of its economic and political weight, its greater approximation to the world centers of power as defined by modernity. This challenge, however, is based not on ideological justifications, but on an objective

aesthetic logic; its ultimate justification is simply the existence, the preservation and the growing influence of a popular artist from the Salvador of yesterday.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> **Carmen Miranda:** O que é que a bahiana tem?

**Coro:** O que é que a bahiana tem?

**CM:** Tem torço de seda tem (tem) / Tem brinco de ouro também (tem)

Corrente de ouro tem (tem) / Tem pano de costa tem (tem)

Tem bata rendada tem (tem) / Pulseira de ouro tem (tem)

Tem saia engomada tem (tem) / Tem sandália enfeitada tem (tem)

E tem graça como ninguém.

**Coro:** O que é que a bahiana tem?

**CM:** Com ela requebra bem

**Coro:** O que é que a bahiana tem?

**CM:** Quando você se requebrar caia por cima de mim.

**Coro:** O que é que a bahiana tem?

**CM:** O que é que a bahiana tem?

Tem torço de seda tem (tem) / Tem brinco de ouro também (tem)

Corrente de ouro tem (tem) / Tem pano de costa tem (tem)

Tem bata rendada tem (tem) / Pulseira de ouro tem (tem)

Tem saia engomada tem (tem) / Tem sandália enfeitada tem (tem)

Só vai no Bonfim quem tem.

**Coro:** O que é que a bahiana tem?

**CM:** Um rosário de ouro / uma balota assim /

Oi, quem não tem balangalãs / não vai no Bonfim.

**Coro:** Ôi, não vai ao Bonfim.

(Dorival Caymmi, *O Que É Que a Bahiana Tem*, 1939)

(What does the Bahiana have? / She has a silk turban (yes she does) / She has a golden earring (...) / She has a gold chain (...), / and a waist cloth (...) / and a lace gown / and a golden bracelet / a starched skirt / a magic slipper / and a grace like no-one else /

/

What does the Bahiana have? / She can really shake it / (...) / Oh, when you swing, swing into me / (...) You've got to have it to go to Bonfim / (...) / a rosary of gold / and those worry beads / Now if you don't have bangles / you don't go to Bonfim / No you don't go to Bonfim.)

<sup>2</sup> The most celebrated literary representation of this archetype is the Delilah-like temptress in Aluizio Azevedo's *O Cortiço*. The story is set in Rio de Janeiro but the character's name is actually Rita Baiana.

<sup>3</sup> From "O Mar", cited here from Caymmi: *uma utopia de lugar*(133).

<sup>4</sup> This chapter was included as an essay in an earlier publication of Riserio which also included essays on Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and on the São Paulo-centered "concretist" poetry movement (*Cores Vivas*).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, *Traduzir e trovar* .

<sup>6</sup> The deviations from standard Portuguese - singular adjective with plural noun, dropped final liquids and so on - are transcribed as such by Riserio. Caymmi sings as transcribed; though it raises interesting questions of differentiation of register, we cannot verify his own orthographic practice without access to his manuscripts.

<sup>7</sup> It might be argued that musicology does analyse lyrics at least in erudite genres such as opera. Even here the argument is lacking in substance; if we take an opera by Mozart, for example, attention is paid essentially to Mozart's musical interpretation of the objective content of the words - of the words as a necessary communicative medium of the emotional intrigue rather than as poetry in themselves - and not the reverse, that is, the re-inforcement of the musical theme through poetic devices in the words, and certainly not as transcendent poetry independent of the music. However, the vogue of rap in contemporary popular music surely points to an artistic - but not a critical - re-invigoration of the *motz.e.lson* dynamic. Study of this relation, would, of course, necessitate a rethinking of the legitimacy of popular art as an aesthetic subject of criticism.

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