Na ponta do verso: poesia de improviso no Brasil

Reviewed by Charles A. Perrone

There is nothing quite like joining a gathering in a public square in a small town in the interior of South America’s largest country and hearing pointed verses hurled one’s way to the delight of the folk attending to the rhythmic words of a pair of rhyme-masters armed with pandeiros. Clearly, their measured lines had to be improvised in the heat of the moment because those agile verse-makers had never before seen me, the clothes I was wearing, how I comport myself, what bags I was carrying, nor did they have any way to estimate how much loose change I might possess to contribute to their cause. Yet those were the topics of their intoned verses. Well, truth be told, the opening idiomatic phrase “nothing quite like” is not exactly right since there are indeed traditions of improvised verse in all corners of Brazil, and something similar to the scene just described could occur in given circumstances in numerous other sites and situations. Such is the subject matter of the publication under review here, the title of which plays on the Portuguese idiom for something “on the tip of one’s tongue” and translates literally as “on the tip of the verse, improvised poetry in Brazil.” The volume, naturally, concerns the principal forms of performed popular poetry that involve improvisation in an immense and multifarious land. Brazil is a huge nation with one of the world’s largest and most varied musical systems for both song and dance music in true folk and popular realms, and this collection is one further reminder of a geo-cultural lesson: the importance of Portuguese both as a language of culture and as an instrument of scholarly expression.

Na ponta do verso has nine well-crafted articles that address pertinent manifestations in different regions of the country. Each contribution follows a template (with attendant space-time constraints) and is linked to corresponding sound recordings on the companion CD, which contains both live and studio examples. The book comprises proceedings of a special event in Rio de Janeiro organized by the Associação Cultural Caburé, a cultural-affairs outfit with much-deserved private-sector and public support, including that of the Ministry of Culture and its Secretariat for Cultural Identity and Diversity. The colloquium brought together a series of interested constituencies: academics from several disciplines, independent scholars, journalists, creative writers, artists, musical producers, and, most notably, folk poets and/or musicians from Rio de Janeiro and other states. The results are unique and valuable, telling of the encounters and evolution of traditions and adaptations in the first decade of the new century and millennium.

The organizers were privileged to obtain a preface by Elizabeth Travassos, professor of Anthropology and Ethnomusicology at UNIRIO (Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro), as well as co-organizer of other noteworthy colloquia on the sung word (see Perrone). She rightly underscores the breadth and diversity of the realms of improvised poetry under scrutiny here. Geographically, there is coverage from the extreme south (the frontier with Uruguay and Argentina) to the northernmost point of the northeast, the region of the “original Brazil” which to this day maintains the highest density and quantity of performative folklore. It is no coincidence that more than forty percent of the material in Na ponta do verso is from the Northeast (which is home to about 25% of the national population). Even within the region, the respective prominence of text itself in different forms or venues and the very concept of “poet” vary significantly from genre to genre. Just as there exists a range of instrumentations and ensemble formations, the value systems associated with improvised verse are plainly not the same from chapter to chapter. Levels of difficulty, expectations, and the need for originality are not alike for individual artists or duos and members of larger groups with numerous integrated functions. Those artists of the word who participate in poetic duels (peleja, desafio, porfia) scholars agree, are clearly in another class. Only rarely do improvisers in any genre have to make up or alter melodies to go along with words to be sung in received tonal contours. Travassos effectively explains the fundamental fact that none of these popular poets are improvising everything that they utter. To adapt to situations and to respond to challenges, poets also draw on mnemonic devices, stock phrases, memorized lines, and previous experience. Improvisation occurs as they shorten the intervals between accessing memory and actual vocalization. Almost universally, there are conventions, limits, dos and don’ts, standards and strophic models to follow, some relatively simple, others decidedly not. The technical complexity of some instances is mind-boggling. In all cases, for listeners to appreciate what they are hearing and seeing, they need to be familiar with the rules, schemes, and tricks that poets might use. In ensemble processions, effective socialization may be more important than lyrical or narrative dexterity.
The royalty of improvised poetry is *cantoria* di viola*, rightly the lead article, which is penned by Braulio Tavares, a writer and cultural activist who has dedicated years to the organization of national festivals of *cantadores* (poet-singers) and *violeiros* (poet-violaplayers), two names for the same persons who duel with one another, strumming rudimentary patterns on a steel-string chordophone while inventing stanzas in quite challenging grids. Unlike most folkloric forms that tend to simplify or disappear over time, especially with industrialization, the system of *cantoria* has become more complex since the mid-nineteenth century. It is considered a “treasure” of Northeastern music (cf. Crook, esp. 91ff.). Today, the best artists must display expertise in a whole series of very codified sub-genres, as basic as quatrains with alternate rhymes and as complex as décimas (ten-line strophes with fixed rhymes and accents) with an extra line and mandatory inclusion of “burdens” (lines that state the theme to be developed). In his reduced space, Tavares does not offer exceptional new insights into this much-studied phenomenon (Silvio Romero published on these remarkable poets in the 1880s), but he does synthesize efficaciously and contrast nicely the organic, telluric, nature-oriented inspired community of poet-singers and those who pride themselves on being studious, prepared, able to retain scientific and intellectual research, thus meriting classification in the same boat as poets of “high art” as opposed to “mere” folklore.

Professor Maria Ignez Novais Ayala contributes two segments, one on *aboio* and one on *coco de embolada*. The original meaning of the former was a form of work-quasi-song practiced during cattle herding; cowhands communicated with animals using loudly intoned vocables that resembled no discursive utterance per se and therefore hardly qualified as poetry. Today, *aboio* is being used to refer to “cowboy poetry,” verse usually concerning human experience associated with the profession. Only some of these stanzas are ever improvised (traditional tales might be altered with a few circumstantial lines), and even the elderly practitioners avoid self-imaging as “poets” per se. The relevance of this topic is understood in the iconography of a recent luxury volume of art and essays about Luiz Gonzaga, the absolute all-time “king” of Northeastern popular music, where one sees the cover of an album dedicated to and titled *Aboios e vaquejadas* [and round ups] among more familiar thematic displays (Fonteles). In Ayala’s pieces, one appreciates her ability to explain variants and to recall landmarks of research, notably the 1930s’ fieldwork of the father of ethnomusicology in Brazil, Mário de Andrade (1893-1945). Her second segment is on *embolada* (tongue twister), on which the opening paragraph of this review was based. The pairs of poets who execute this genre truly improvise, whether mixing novel variants into known sung stories or commenting on situations with plenty of humor, nonsense, bragadocio, or even insults. The article further assesses issues of recording, how studio arrangements may disqualify natural settings or how smart producers can today remedy such limitations.

One such studio wizard is Siba Veloso, who co-authors with Astier Basílio, the article on rural *maracatu*, a carnival ensemble and procession in the ever artistically-rich state of Pernambuco. This segment is perhaps the most interesting in *Na ponta do verso* because it concerns new material, actual folkloric innovation. In the last thirty years, the most significant changes have come in the area of text. Formerly produced by mostly illiterate folk, the verse sections of this kind of *maracatu* have been influenced by both *cantoria* and *embolada*, adding rules and becoming more technically demanding and topically broad. The name for the versified disputes is still *sambada*, but both text and sartorial accoutrements have become more extravagant. Groups have increased in number and level of professionalization, and recordings have kept pace due to the tireless efforts of dedicated specialists. This is a great story with scholarly intrigue (see highlights in Murphy and Crook).

The segment on the variety of samba in Rio de Janeiro known as *partido alto* is an extra-solid contribution because it is essentially a summary of a well-researched book on the topic by the leading popular intellectual and samba musician, Nei Lopes. One gleans from his account that improvisation in this genre was considerably more important in decades past; today players pay homage, as it were, to memorable anthological moments of textual invention and display knowledge of received repertories. The term *partido alto*, incidentally, today designates a characteristic rhythmic pattern in samba much more than on-the-spot verse-making. When it does involve such practice, “offensive” approaches, unlike in other genres, are not welcome. What is most compelling in this narrative is how the genre resulted from the confluence of rural traditions brought to the big city by principally Afro-Brazilian migrants from other states. One of the forms that blended into *partido alto* in the port of Rio de Janeiro in the early twentieth century was the “lizard-like” dance with sung improvisations called *calango*. Anthropologist Cáscia Frade studies this poetic form—backed by button accordion, tambourine, and triangle—in municipalities on the border with the state of Minas Gerais. Players mostly perform known pieces but have the liberty to contrive new words in live situations. In this and other pieces, authors usefully remind readers of some of the foundational texts of Brazilian folklore scholarship, which have always attended to the fact of improvisation.
If calango is uncomplicated and circumscribed, complexity and multiplicity are keys to characterizing the domain of folia de reis (itinerant Three Kings pageants). Professor Daniel Bitter offers a study of a group in Rio de Janeiro, but similar groups exist (under this or like rubrics) in just about every Brazilian state. The two figures known to improvise text when the carolers arrive at a house (or other location in the community) are the mestre (maestro, leader) and the palhâço (clown), whose burlesque antics and astute reactions allow for invocation of cultural theorist Bakhtin, a type of citation that proves to be rare in this edited volume. The contrived stanzas appear to matter more for their socializing worth—establishing and maintaining contact with the audience—than for any aesthetic value, as would be the case in cantoria. Bitter also rightly cites Suzel Reilly but neglects to include the corresponding data in his bibliography. She studies groups farther south, as does Tremura. In the folia de reis of São Paulo state that he examines, group leaders must be able to compose tunes and to improvise song texts, which are developed according to the performance circumstances. Bitter focuses on the clown figure, but in São Paulo, the mestre creates verses to fulfill requests made by families or others. For its part, the cururu paulista presented by ethnomusicologist Alberto T. Ikeda displays several unique features. Most notably, it is the only ensemble with as many as four voices improvising poetry, which can mean real team competition, as well as different ways to take turns singing. Unlike northeastern counterparts, these poet-singers have a series of melodies to choose from, vocal quality matters more, and strophic consistency is not always de rigueur. Motes (burdens) are not used to begin competitions and public squares are not normal venues. Radio is still used as a medium of sharing this practice, and cururu is a true form of popular communication with abiding potential for improvisation. It is also a song form and part of the encompassing musical system of música sertaneja (country music), the nation’s largest. One other unique trait is the indigenous (Tupi) root of the name and song form.

The closing segment is about pajada in Rio Grande do Sul, which has been revived in rather limited form through the efforts of a few individuals, including the author himself, Paulo de Freitas Mendonça. His segment is most attractive for its insertion into the discussion of traditionalism and nativism, cultural revival movements in this extreme southern state, where concerted (re-)construction of regional identity via select vehicles of expressive culture has been stronger than anywhere else in Brazil. Another aspect that international scholars will find appealing is the transnational perspective, as this gaucho culture is part of the larger domain in Uruguay and Argentina, which has received more attention.

The CD has sixteen tracks, one each for aboio and calango and two each for the remaining seven genres studied, which may tell us something about the relative prestige of the genres. The appendix includes a very useful transcription of all the sung words (but no translation for non Portuguese-conversant international readers). Appropriately, most of the tracks were captured live at the colloquium of origin of this volume. The marks of improvisation are evident in references to the immediate present and in the natural unfolding of the sound events. A few of the CD examples are reprints from a marvelous project of the 1990s, a public release of phonograms of the historic folklore missions of 1938 conducted by Mário de Andrade. The tracks of maracatu are reprints, but they are recently produced and persuasive; the feel is spot on, convincing, and admirably negotiated. There is a sensation of vibrant artistic reality as opposed to nostalgic rescue of "endangered species." For their part, the tracks for partido alto were taken from a milestone 1966 studio LP, in an attempt to simulate folk conditions. Similarly, the two tracks for gaúcho vocal music are from recent niche commercial recordings and more illustrative of the talent of the artist than of the improvised tradition he purports to represent. One is reminded of the main criticism of the remarkable five-volume compendium of regional folk/popular musics of Brazil undertaken by Discos Marcus Pereira in the late 1970s (subsequently re-released in CD format): too much of the folk material seems contrived and/or prettified for middle-class consumer tastes. Finally, each article opens with a pen-and-ink drawing by Luciana Carvalho depicting a scene of folklife with performers in costume and, in some cases, an appreciative public. These pleasing illustrations are inspired in the wood-cut prints typical of the covers of popular broadside ballads. Still, the ethnographic imperative abides, and one would like to be able to see photographic registers of realia, performers and performance venues.

In their introduction, the organizers of Na ponta do verso state that they had two main goals: to show the universality of improvised verse, and to stress the pursuit of a broader view of Brazil’s oral poetry for its recognition as lively, dynamic, and current. To this end they have been successful, and a nice complement to achievement at home would be increased attention abroad to the senses and sounds of their special subject.

Works Cited


