Discussion Questions (10/02)

Discussion Questions on Vianna: (submitted by Emily)

1. In the development of the Brazilian state, we have put great emphasis on the fact that it was a top-down process. Samba and other aspects of popular culture, on the other hand, are noted for being bottom-up processes (p. 11). If state-building projects had been of a similar bottom-up nature, would there still have been this vacuum of things "popular" that allowed samba to flourish at all levels of society?

2. Near the end of the book, after talking about Bossa Nova and other post-samba forms of music, Vianna brings up Paulinho da Viola, who has lamented that "the community of samba is no more." Vianna responds by saying: "But neither is there a rock community, or even a samba-reggae community. Does this also spell the end of the 'mestiço paradigm,' that version of Brazilian identity created with so much care and effort by many groups with a converging interest in 'things Brazilian?' What can now assure the unity--even if it is only the musical unity--of Brazil?" (p. 106). How do you respond to this, perhaps unanswered, question?

3. How do Vianna's concluding remarks about the dangers of supporting a plan of mestizagem, which can ultimately lead to homogeneity (p. 111), relate to the above question about where Brazil is headed/should be headed?

Discussion Questions on Vianna: (submitted by Jane)

1. The book alludes to the fact that several social and political factors set the stage for samba to dominate as a unifying example of nationalism and an “authentic” Brazil. These factors include the historical tradition of interaction between social classes, the perceived need for “things Brazilian,” Vargas’ rise to power and call for nationalism, and Freyre’s ground-breaking work applauding racial and cultural mixing. How do these forces influence one another? Did any have a significantly greater impact on the crystallization of samba than the others? How did the combination of these forces make way for the popularization of samba, and how may the process of samba’s elevation have evolved differently if one social or political force had not been present?

2. The author states, “In the wake of the 1930 revolution, the dominant political and cultural movements of Brazil became overwhelmingly centralizing, unifying, and homogenizing—in a word, nationalizing” (p. 41). Vianna claims that samba formed part of the attempt at constructing a national, homogeneous identity. Yet this national identity was also grounded in the concept of plurality; racial and cultural mixing as promoted by Freyre. How was samba able to mutually support these juxtaposed concepts of a national identity? How did the incorporation of other forms of music, such as the blocos afros and rock, impact the Brazilian notion of its national identity?

3. Through what means did the carioca samba of Rio de Janeiro become defined and projected as the national music? In a search for “things Brazilian,” with “authentic”
Afro-Brazilian roots, why did the nationalists turn to the music of the white, industrial south rather than to Bahia or other areas of the country?

4. With *carioca* samba originally viewed as the music of the lower-class, Vianna claims that inter-class relations enabled poorer, Afro-Brazilians to avoid repression and promote their music by forming relations and gathering support from individual members of the upper-class? How is the historical tradition of coronelismo echoed in this situation? What is the significance of the music of the lower-class becoming the symbol of national identity?