

LEVINE, Robert M. *The Brazilian Photographs of Genevieve Naylor, 1940-1942*. Durham, Duke University Press: 1998. 155p.

The distant silhouette of Corcovado's Christ the Redeemer is framed by billowing sheets hung from clotheslines above a residential neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro. Dozens of pilgrims kneel before a baroque church in the interior of Minas Gerais, anti-leprosy posters pasted to the walls in the background. Young socialites stand on the edge of Copacabana beach, with the skirts of their bathing suits rustling in the gentle breeze. These are just a few of the charming, intriguing photographs taken nearly sixty years ago in Brazil by Genevieve Naylor, a pioneering American photographer who was one of the first women to break into the ranks of high-profile photojournalism and, later, fashion photography.

From 1940 to 1942 Naylor worked as a photographer for the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA). Her assignment was to photograph the people and places of Brazil in such a way as to reassure the American public that Brazil was a reliable ally in the war against the axis powers. Surpassing her assignment, she produced a collection of historically and aesthetically important photographs that captured the nuances of life in Brazil during a period of great change, a period that left very few other reliable visual records.

Robert M. Levine, Professor of History and director of Latin American Studies at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, has assembled the surviving photographs from Naylor's Brazilian work. Levine's essays provide a thorough discussion

of the historical, political, cultural, and technical contexts that shaped Naylor's work.

Brazil was in the midst of Getúlio Vargas's *Estado Novo*, a period of massive modernization, urbanization and nation building, marked by a great deal of censorship, repression, and corporatist politics bordering on fascism. The United States, on the brink of entering World War II and growing into its role as an international super-power, was fostering friendly relations in the western hemisphere with its "good neighbor policy." Nelson Rockefeller's OIAA spent the United States' first-ever foreign social aid money "to improve living conditions in the region and to promote social and economic welfare as a deterrent against international fascism" (19). The extensive cultural activities of the OIAA included financing and producing magazines, radio broadcasts, movies and visits by fine artists, dancers and even the Yale Glee Club. Besides Naylor, the OIAA sent two photographers to Brazil, who were to cover architecture and public health issues.

Levine reconstructs Naylor's stay in Brazil, using letters that she wrote to family, friends, and colleagues, as well as interviews with Naylor's surviving family members. Given the political nature of her assignment and the repressive nature of the *Estado Novo* period, Naylor carved out an extraordinary amount of freedom for herself; her official travel pass permitted her to "take photographs of touristic sites" (36), but Naylor overcame the limitations of censorship and the propagandistic nature of her work to produce a rich, deeply textured body of work.

In addition to bureaucratic and political obstacles, Levine describes a variety of technical limitations and logistical complications that Naylor had to overcome. "She had no assistants, no fast film, no strobes. All she used was a Rolleiflex, a 4x5 Speed Graphic camera and natural light," Levine writes (46). She traveled outside Rio de Janeiro, to Belém do Pará, Recife, Maceió, and Congonhas and down the Rio São Francisco through the interior of Bahia, in spite of train crashes and steam ships stuck on sand bars.

The pictures she produced under these arduous conditions contain invaluable information about the way Brazilians lived in the 1940s, information that doesn't exist in

any other form. Brazilian photographers were unable to overcome state censorship, and most foreign photographers resorted to stereotypical portrayals of the Brazilian people and landscape. A few other photographers made good pictures of particular aspects of Brazilian life at the time (notably Pierre Verger's picture of Afro-Brazilian life in Salvador), but the variety and depth of Naylor's work are unparalleled.

Naylor covered an amazing variety of subjects: crowds at theaters and religious festivals; the cream of high society watching the races at the Jockey Club and refugees from a northeast drought waiting for charity food; graffiti, signs, menus, and public health posters; urban renewal and falling down buildings. All of these pictures share an expressive sensitivity to gesture and light.

She had a talent for capturing the bizarre juxtapositions that signaled the changing flavor of Brazilian life. In "Copacabana Fishermen" (plate 23) a group of men wearing floppy hats and sweat-soaked suit jackets labor over their nets on the beach, with a mix of traditional single family mansions and new high rise apartments looming in the background. In "Working Class Restaurant" (plate 43) men stand and sit around rude tables in a half-built (or half-ruined) shack, eating, drinking, and taking care of business. We can gather a wealth of information about the physical culture of the time—details about clothing, food, the urban environment—but it's harder to say just what the men in the picture are doing. If Naylor made detailed notes about the events occurring in her pictures, they did not survive.

Other pictures are even more mysterious. "Street Scene" (plate 69) depicts a decaying building with a young man standing at the door, showing the inside of his suit jacket to the women standing inside. What are they doing? Levine (and the viewer) can only guess. The caption indicates two possibilities: the man may be a salesman with his wares stored inside his jacket, or he may be a local boy showing off the lining of his new suit. The captions are useful guides, pointing out salient details in the pictures, but clearly there are limitations to the kinds of historical information that photographs can provide. For example, there's a question of whether Naylor ever traveled to Salvador, Bahia, which throws the location of a few of the photos in the book into question.

Often the conflict and drama in the photos strains just below the surface. In "Tanks in the City" (plate 12) a pair of tanks in the center of the image are surrounded by people standing quietly on either side, while the filigree of trolley wires overhead is mirrored in long shadows on the cobble stones of the street. Naylor's balanced framing creates a mood of quiet tension. There are other examples: the harried, anxious faces of a band of carnival revelers (plate 28), a children's merry-go-round bizarrely surrounded by barbed wire (plate 74), or groups of displaced nordestinos waiting for food handouts (plate 82).

In his introduction Levine writes that "traditionally photographs have been judged on the basis of their nominal content-genre, tonality, composition and other aesthetic characteristics. For the social historian, photography provides information about effective content as well. This category includes inventories of material cultural, unexpected objects, and things not expected to be found" (6). That's fair enough, but oddly, he also asserts that Naylor's photos "are valuable not as creative works but as documents of everyday life" (11).

It seems strange to diminish the aesthetic nature of these pictures. Some of the best photos here, to my eye, are the ones that provide the least answers and ask the most questions, like "Carnival" (plate 77), a dreamlike, ethereal portrait of two young revelers wearing costumes and carrying toys. I think the book would have benefited from a deeper reading of the formal aspects of Naylor's pictures.

Also, Levine tends to over-emphasize the upbeat nature of Naylor's work. In an effort to fulfill her assignment, Levine writes, she "never emphasized futility or downright misery" (42), and "did not bring back harrowing images from Brazil, because she had been hired explicitly to produce images that would assure American audiences that Brazil was making great strides" (50). Although Naylor got in trouble for taking pictures of poor people, Levine writes, she "found ways to ignore what her bosses wanted without finding herself on the next ship back to the United States" (39). But he still seems surprised by her more challenging images. He describes "Family Group" (plate 58), a picture of a disheveled, distraught family in a church, as "uncharacteristic of Naylor's work but ... a powerful image." True, the tone of most of her photographs is generally light and

the faces of her subjects are generally happy or calm, but there are also many photographs of disgruntled people and tense scenes. Rather than seeing these difficult images as one more complex facet of a sophisticated whole, Levine seems to discount them as somehow out of place in the body of Naylor's usual work.

Levine seems more comfortable with the notion that Naylor practiced a brand of photojournalism that does not deprive the poor of their dignity by portraying them as ragged or angry, and he seems to gloss over a few of Naylor's most dynamic pictures because they don't fit this preference. But this review is not the place to discuss the ethics of documentary photography, and my criticisms are meant to point out slight flaws in an excellent book.

Naylor's Brazilian photographs are an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the look, the light, and the flow of life in Brazil in the early 1940s, or in the career of this important photographer. Levine's text positions the pictures solidly within their context, illuminating both the historical moment that Naylor documented and the beautiful, captivating body of work she produced there.

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