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Brazilian Images: The 1940s Photographs of Genevieve Naylor. Robert Levine and Peter Reznikoff.

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This video essay, written by historian Robert M. Levine and produced by Levine and Genevieve Naylor's son, Peter Reznikoff, is a welcome addition to the field of historical documentary. The visual track, which consists mainly of a judicious and captivating montage of black-and-white photographs taken by Naylor between 1940 and 1943, offers the viewer a rare, wide-ranging, and singularly "non-touristic" look at a country many Americans continue to associate with the "lady in the tutti frutti hat." Meanwhile, the narration on the soundtrack, scripted by Robert M. Levine, gives us insight into Naylor's immediate working context, and in doing so, ventures into a historical realm that is deserving of renewed scrutiny: the pivotal period during World War II when, at the persuasion of the United States, Brazil loosened its ties to the Axis powers and joined the Allied cause. <p> Rather than establish an arbitrary relation between this "context" and Naylor's artistic endeavors, the voice-over narration, flexibly supported by the images, manages to balance and interweave the two domains. Formally, this is accomplished by alternating "third-person," detached narration with "first-person" commentaries excerpted from written observations made by Brazilian critic and composer Vinicius de Moraes and Naylor herself at the time of her expedition. Substantively, the narration traces Naylor's intrepid efforts to break through the "glass lens cap" surrounding the traditionally male profession of photojournalism (in the 1930s, she was a staff photographer for the Associated Press), then shows how, in the same spirit, she was able to negotiate a margin of creative independence in the face of the multiple political and cultural challenges she and her husband, painter Misha Reznikoff, encountered in their official capacity as "good will" ambassadors dispatched to Brazil by Nelson Rockefeller's Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs. This was the U.S. agency most responsible for designing and implementing the Good Neighbor Policy in Latin America during World War II. <p> Treading a tightrope between the restrictions set by the Department of Press and Propaganda, under Brazilian head of state Getulio Vargas, her OIAA-determined mandate to document as much of Brazilian society as possible, and a vast socially and culturally diverse population (much of which was carefully hidden from the scrutiny of foreign lenses), Naylor opted for an approach that was at once prismatic and intimate. Her work (as sampled in the video) covers countless themes–from labor to leisure and religious worship–in three distinct, yet equally important regions of Brazil: the industrialized, politically powerful Central South; the traditional, still agriculturally productive Northeast; and the not-so-virgin Amazon basin. Yet in place of the panoramic views one tends to obtain in more complacent, naturalist renderings (by foreigners and metropolitan Brazilians alike), Naylor invites us to experience the specific texture of these regions through human scenes shot at extremely close range. Keeping within the bounds of what would have been either politically or ethically transgressive, hers is a subtle, patient, yet penetrating gaze at a country that was in the throes of rapid change as a result of Getulio Vargas' new social programs, along with the introduction of a more "extroverted" stance toward foreign relations. <p> Yet Naylor, the video essay tells us, was not alone. In addition to Naylor and her husband, several other American artists were sent to Brazil around this time as observers and performers under the auspices of the OIAA. Among them was Orson Welles, who was in the process of elaborating his own four-part documentary essay on Latin America as part of the Good Neighbor initiative. The parallel with Welles's visit is well-taken, since Welles, like Naylor, was inter-

ested in portraying the contrast between Brazil's regions; gave precedence to the culturally, economically, and politically disenfranchised, over the urban elite, as principal protagonists; and shared an aesthetic interest in the pioneering efforts of filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein, D.W. Griffith, and Robert Flaherty. However, Welles's increasing, and eventually, devastating difficulties with conservative elements within the Brazilian elite and the American business community (mainly at RKO, his sponsoring studio) merely underscore how Naylor as an "unassuming" woman photographer, unburdened by bulky equipment, a film crew, and press notoriety, was able skillfully to elide these obstacles and bring her project to fruition. <p> At this point one might raise two slight critical observations in relation to this documentary. First, although photographs of other "good will" ambassadors are presented, they are not identified, and most viewers are unable to fill this gap on the basis of their own visual memory. Second, while the resemblances between Naylor's still photographs and the work of film stylists such as Flaherty, Eisenstein, and John Ford are clearly explained and well-founded–leading one fully to appreciate her departure from "straight" photojournalism–one cannot help but note the equally striking resonances between the austere intimacy of Sebastiao Salgado's photographs, or the stark, poetic mises-en-scenes of exponents of Brazil's Cinema Novo, such as filmmakers Nelson Pereira dos Santos (especially <cite>Vidas Secas</cite>, <cite>Rio 40 Graus</cite>) and Glauber Rocha (<cite>Antonio das Mortes</cite>, <cite>Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol</cite>). Crafted a full twenty to thirty years prior to these works, Naylor's work stands as an important, yet neglected precedent to the increasingly socially engaged use of media in Brazil. In constructing an intriguing glimpse at the over 1,300 images Naylor produced, Levine and Reznikoff supply us with the beginnings of a still-needed antidote to the deracination and misappropriation of Brazil's rich geocultural landscape that has been carried out–even to the chagrin of Carmen Miranda–on the Hollywood screen, but not without stressing the key role to be played by sensitive, audiovisually expressive historiography. <p>