Beyond the Lens: Historicizing Life in Brazil During the First Vargas Era

My research examined the historical relationship between the work of American photojournalist Genevieve Naylor and the Brazilian state in the 1930s and 1940s. Much of the scholarship of this era has investigated the political and economic policies of the corporatist government. An analysis of Naylor’s work will illustrate how the Vargas Administration used photography as a cultural tool to disseminate propaganda, furthering its agenda of modernizing the nation, and also uncover the historically complex interaction between the subject and the photographer.

In June of 2012 I conducted research at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) archives in New York City with the support of departmental professional development funds. Once I documented the numerous photographs and descriptions of Naylor’s work I spent the first week of August completing the examination of the collected images. My efforts focused on analyzing the key images, of life on the street in Rio de Janeiro, Carnival, and portraits. I used the remaining three weeks to write a draft of a chapter-length paper analyzing the relationship between Naylor’s photographs and the agenda of the Vargas Administration.

I presented the results of my research and writing at the XXXI International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association in May of 2013, as part of a larger panel, “Visualizing the Nation: Representations of the National in 20th Century Latin American Art and Photography. The feedback I received from this presentation helped me revise the draft as a chapter of my manuscript, moving the project forward towards completion.