My two research projects look at the representation of immigration in art and architecture in New York City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Focusing on the architecture of Castle Garden and Ellis Island, the immigration stations in operation in New York City during this time, I examine the way architecture was used to structure and narrate visual and textual investigations of immigration. The space of immigration, especially the representation of that space in art and the popular press, was instrumental in creating a manner of looking at both the immigrant and the nation as a whole.

My first project centers on the liminal space of immigration stations and the way ideology became embedded in architectural forms, in the space created by the architecture, and by the reproduction of that space in paint, print, photograph, and text.

Architecture became the dividing line between migration and citizenship, between past and future. After visiting Ellis Island, Henry James (The American Scene) wrote about his visit to the new Immigration Station. James was shaken by the degree to which witnessing the processing at Ellis Island had forever altered his perception of the concepts of nation and citizen. “Let not the unwary visit Ellis Island,” he admonished before asking, “Which is the American . . . which is not the alien . . . ?” He went on to ask, “Where does one put a finger on the dividing line” between “alien” and “American?”

The interstitial space of the immigration station, I argue, was just such an attempt to fix a dividing line between the established American and the new immigrant.

One aspect of my research centers on Ellis Island architecture and the way the Beaux-Arts design, chosen for the new station after the old Romanesque building burned in 1897, sent a message to immigrants that they were entering a country that had a deep rooted history with well-known hierarchies and accepted codes of behavior. For the young republic, the architecture suggested an extended history—exactly that attribute that would be taken away from the...
immigrant upon arrival—through processing, cleansing and fumigation. Traveling through the space of the immigration station, a process reported frequently in the press, the immigrant was cleansed, literally and metaphorically, of history and homeland and delivered forth as a new American. Birth metaphors, common in immigration architecture discourse at this time, further located the argument in contemporary conversations on heredity. Furthermore, the space of the Registry Room at Ellis Island visually recalled the hierarchical space of another frequently represented scene in immigration accounts, the boat picture; both spaces bespoke social stratifications in America.

My second project examines the image of an immigrant woman breastfeeding a baby at Castle Garden. Although the immigrant mother has been the subject of migration studies, the breastfeeding immigrant has not received any scholarly attention. Curiously, the breastfeeding immigrant was a stock character in crowded pictures of Castle Garden. By examining paintings and illustrations from the popular press, I will consider the ways the image of the lactating immigrant woman constructed a space of immigration that was imbued with ethnicity, citizenship, and eugenics. Breast-milk, like blood, was believed to be a medium for hereditary transmission and it was thought that a woman’s behavior as well as her moral character could be passed through the milk. That is, her past would forever taint the immigrant and her offspring.