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Three to Read

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Three to Read

Faculty publish innovative scholarship and creative work.

Stories by KIM HILL

Faculty scholars at Illinois Wesleyan have a long tradition of publishing widely in their fields — a practice that continued this academic year with the publication of three acclaimed books by IWU professors.

A Hispanic Studies professor brought poems by a renowned Spanish author to an English-speaking audience, while a second faculty author saw a volume of her poetry win a major literary prize. Meanwhile, a religion professor's newest book yielded surprising insights into the lives of women in colonial Brazil.



Carmela Ferradans

Bilingual beauty

For years, Professor of Hispanic Studies Carmela Ferradans has been fascinated by the work of Spanish writer Ana Rossetti, a transformative figure in 20th- and 21st-century Spanish culture.

That fascination reached fruition as Ferradans published *Incessant Beauty* (2LeafPress, 2014). It is the first dual language Spanish/English collection of Rossetti's poetry.

Ferradans worked with Rossetti for a decade to select poems offering a wide range of themes and poetic registers that span more than 30 years. Though widely studied in the United States, Rossetti's work has never been published in a bilingual collection of this scope.

"Ferradans has crafted an unrepentant, unconfessional poetics in which narratives obscure as much as they reveal about a speaker whose very identity is in flux," wrote Virginia Bell, a senior editor with *RHINO Poetry* who teaches English at Loyola University Chicago, in her review of the book. "In so doing, Ferradans has given Anglophone readers a gift whose beauty is, indeed, relentless and incessant. And we are very grateful."

Many women poets emerged in Spain after censorship restrictions were lifted following the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975. Rossetti grew in prominence by using verbal artistry, playfulness and daring to explore previously taboo topics such as sexuality and gender. Among Ferradans' favorite works from that early period is "Calvin Klein, Underdrawers."

"I have been reading and teaching this poem for more than 20 years now, and I find it still a wondrous journey of desire," said Ferradans. "Rossetti's poetry is so tactile you can almost touch and feel the words and images."

In *Incessant Beauty*, Ferradans hopes to bring Rossetti, who is among the best-known living poets of Spain, to an English-speaking audience.

Collaborating with Ferradáns was Robert Bray, R. Forrest Colwell Professor of American Literature at Illinois Wesleyan, who translated Rossetti's "Poetics" for the book. Mixed-media artist Spencer Sauter '70, an adjunct art professor at IWU, created the digital painting used for the cover art.

Ferradáns specializes in contemporary Spanish poetry with a strong interest in critical theory and cultural studies. In addition to language courses, she teaches modern and contemporary Spanish cultural history and literature. She joined the IWU faculty in 1992 after earning a Ph.D. at the University of California, Irvine.

Connecting to tyranny

A collection of poems by Assistant Professor of English Joanne Diaz is the winner of this year's Brittingham Prize in Poetry.

My Favorite Tyrants (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014) was awarded the annual prize for the best book-length manuscript of original poetry. Guest judge Naomi Shihab Nye, a Pushcart Prize-winning poet and novelist, selected Diaz's book out of approximately 600 submissions, calling the work "rich with smart, deft scenes — places you may not have been before, exactly, but feel strangely at home in."

The word "tyrant" summons images of various infamous historic and political figures — some of whom make appearances in the poems. But Diaz is equally interested in personal forms of tyranny.

"These tyrants emerge in familial relationships, in erotic relationships, the way we demand things of each other and the way we try to control each other," said Diaz. "I also try to examine how the speaker of the poems can be a kind of tyrant, too."

She explained that the structure of the poems in *My Favorite Tyrants* differs from her first collection of poems, *The Lessons*, the recipient of the Gerald Cable Book Award in 2009. She characterizes the poems in *Tyrants* as "more voluminous and conversational." Some reviewers said these poems read more like essays with line breaks, a description that pleases Diaz.

"We get the word 'essay' from the Old French assai, which means 'to attempt' and so I like thinking of these poems as attempts to understand, negotiate or argue with something," she explained. "In some of the poems, I'll connect a familial problem to something that's happening politically."

After tackling her Boston upbringing, the histories of various diseases and their cures, political despots and tyranny in her first two books, Diaz is writing a series of poems on electricity for her next collection.



Joanne Diaz

“It’s nice to be writing new material,” said Diaz. Over the past year, she has, with Ian Morris, been co-editing a book titled *The Little Magazine in America: A Contemporary Guide*, forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press. Diaz joined the IWU faculty in 2008 after earning a doctorate in English literature from Northwestern University. Her poetry has appeared in *AGNI*, *The American Poetry Review* and *Prairie Schooner*, among others. She is also a past recipient of writing fellowships from the Illinois Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Uncharted territory



Carole Myscowski brings insights from her research into the classroom. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Despite the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church’s role in colonial Brazil, women managed to thrive within the strict rules of the church and society’s constraints on women’s roles, according to a new book from Carole A. Myscowski.

The McFee Professor of Religion at IWU, Myscowski drew on original manuscripts and records from Jesuit missionaries, church officials and Portuguese Inquisitors to research and write *Amazons, Wives, Nuns and Witches: Women and the Catholic Church in Colonial Brazil, 1500-1822* (University of Texas Press, 2013).

The book provides a rare look at Catholic colonial views of the ideal woman, patterns in women’s education, religious views on marriage and sexuality, the history of women’s convents and retreat houses and the development of magical practices among women in the colonial era of Brazil.

“This is history at its best — nuanced, animated, and theoretically informed,” wrote R. Andrew Chesnut, Bishop Walter F. Sullivan Chair in Catholic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. “Like the *bandeirantes* of colonial Brazil, Myscowski is a trailblazer leading us into the uncharted territory of the lives of women during the era of Portuguese dominion.”

“No book in the English language covers the topic of Brazilian women,” said Myscowski, who also directs the Women’s Studies Program at Illinois Wesleyan. “That’s partly because there are so few records from this period, and almost nothing in the voices of women themselves.”

She noted primary sources such as diaries, letters and essays are lacking during the period from the launch of Portuguese colonization in 1500 to Brazil’s declaration of independence in 1822. A historian of religions, Myscowski said the records of the Portuguese Inquisition became a central source for her research.

The tone of women’s responses to the Inquisitor surprised and delighted Myscowski. “The Inquisitor was someone who could have you arrested, possibly imprisoned for the rest of your life, or shipped back to Lisbon to be put on trial and killed,” she explained. “And women were refusing to be categorized” for their

explanations of certain cooking practices (which meant they might be keeping Jewish practices) or for certain prayers or remedies (which might or might not have meant they were practicing magic).

“That kind of pushback was a real surprise to me,” added Myscowski. “I was happy to see they weren’t all being submissive, and also to discover they weren’t all being persecuted for being witches.”

Another happy surprise during her research was the discovery of a box of 17th-century documents in the National Cathedral in Rio de Janeiro. The documents contained the requests of young women and girls to enter the convent. “These are so rare because the convents themselves did not keep these things as ordinary practice, some of the convents in Rio have burned, and the documents themselves are very fragile because they haven’t been kept in good storage,” said Myscowski.

The box’s contents also revealed that not all convent residents were novices. Young women from leading families who were awaiting suitable marriages, as well as widows who had no family, sometimes lived in convents for years.

Most surviving documents are first-person accounts of the male Portuguese explorers and missionaries. Myscowski’s research indicated the white men who first visited Brazil expected the indigenous women to be docile or fierce, sometimes both at the same time, or even warlike Amazons.

“The conflicting ideals of what women should be and what the explorers and missionaries were seeing — neither of these reflected any sort of reality of how women lived,” said Myscowski. “Women were neither the ideal mute, modest Christian women nor were they savages. They were just folks trying to do their best in either culture.”

The author earned a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and joined the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan in 1991. Myscowski served as the area editor for “New Religions” for the HarperCollins *Dictionary of Religion* and as the editor of the *Academy Series*, sponsored by the American Academy of Religions and published by Oxford University Press.