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Myscowski's Book Writes Brazilian Women Back into History

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Carole Myscowski

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— In spite of 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 Illinois Wesleyan University's 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 & Witches* (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.



"No book in the English language covers the topic of Brazilian women," said Myscowski, who also directs the **women's studies** 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 for the colonial period, from 1500 to 1822, the date of Brazilian independence. 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 push back 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. "So the fact that this box ended up in the church archives is pretty amazing." The box also included ledgers kept by the convent,

which revealed that widows who had no family and young women of leading families who might take up residence at a convent until a suitable marriage could be arranged lived in convents for years at a time.

Documents that have survived, of course, are the first-person accounts of the male Portuguese explorers and missionaries. Myscowski said her 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.

“This was a counter-idea to the Portuguese Catholic idea of the passive, demure, modest ideal woman who had married very young, with very little creative activities,” said Myscowski. “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. 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.

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