Michelle Molina - Northwestern University

“I love the Jesuits”: Reason and Affect in an 18th Century Conversion Narrative

December 5, 2:00 pm
Hoagy Carmichael Room,
Morrison Hall

In 1768, a young Lutheran Swedish merchant named Lorenzo Thjülen took a boat from Cadiz to Corsica and found himself among 200 ex-Jesuits who, recently expelled from Mexico, were en-route to their exile in Bologna, Italy. Thjülen was an eighteenth century seeker and, as he told his story, his quest for true religion – a religion in accord with reason – had begun with Voltaire, but led him to embrace the Jesuits and Catholicism. True enough, his engagement with the Jesuits was fueled in part by this young man’s determination to evaluate the rationality of the Catholic faith, but this is only part of the story, for, in what follows I will point to the fact that he offers very few “reasonable” explanations for his ultimate conversion. Rather, the strongest narrative thread traces his intense affective connection to a Jesuit theologian from New Spain named Iturriaga. Thjülen’s discourse privileged “reason,” yet the plotline follows an affective trajectory as we see how his intense bond with Iturriaga served as the primary motivation for his embrace of a creed whose institutional and ritual contours Thjülen at times found a tad distasteful.

J. Michelle Molina (PhD, University of Chicago, 2004) studies the Society of Jesus in the early modern period. She explores Jesuit spirituality in an effort to understand how individuals – both elite and commoner -- approached and experienced religious transformation. In particular, she has been interested in examining the impact of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises – a meditative retreat geared toward self-reform – on early modern global expansion. Molina’s book, To Overcome Oneself: The Jesuit Ethic and the Spirit of Global Expansion is published with University of California Press.