

2024 Iwanter Prize Winners Announced

The Award Recognizes Excellence in Undergraduate Humanities Scholarship

MADISON, Wis. (July 17, 2024) – Recent graduate **Holly Puza** (B.A. May '24, English Literature, Political Science, and International Studies and certificate in European Studies) received the 2024 [Iwanter Prize for Undergraduate Research](#), an annual award administered by the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Center for the Humanities. The \$2,000 prize is given to a graduating senior who, through a senior thesis and general academic distinction, demonstrates outstanding humanities-based scholarship of a broad and interdisciplinary nature.

It was another competitive year for the Iwanter Prize with many compelling entries. The \$500 Honorable Mention Prize was awarded to **Matthew Masonius** (B.A. May '24, History and Political Science and certificates in Public Policy and Environmental Studies).

The prize was established in 2000 by alumnus **Sidney E. Iwanter** (B.A. '71, History), who said, "In this academic year featuring a landscape of such chaos and uncertainty, it is uplifting to witness such a continuing form of scholarship from these seniors."

Iwanter Prize for Undergraduate Research: Holly Puza

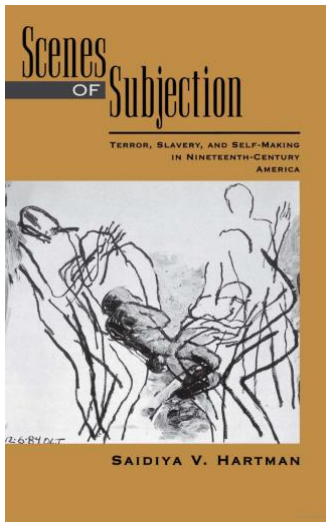
Holly Puza won the Iwanter prize for her thesis, *"Is that how free feels?": Aesthetic Knowledge in the Neo-Slave Narrative*, which explores how aesthetics create new ways of thinking about the human that are integral to abolition and the making of post-liberal politics. In the project, Puza focuses on how aesthetic inquiry uses "knowing through feeling" to reframe our remembrances of enslavement in emotional, anti-racist ways. By looking at the intervention contemporary art makes in Black Studies, Puza argues that treating aesthetics as a method of knowledge can help develop political concepts that prioritize human experience over liberal reductions of the human to property.



Holly Puza

Puza's approach to the project was to read the neo-slave genre as an "alternative language of liberty" tied to the "sensibility of creation" to show how the genre, read through an aesthetic framework, validates affectivity as a way to draw political conclusions. "I believe these insights create ideological spaces for new lives to emerge beyond liberalism," Puza writes.

Kristina Huang, Assistant Professor of English at UW-Madison, guided Puza's thesis work. "Across her thesis research and her work in my courses, Holly has demonstrated that she is an imaginative and rigorous thinker," Huang writes. "Working across experimental poetry, short stories, and novels, Holly's thesis research attends to how Black writers have interrogated the afterlives of colonialism



Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997; a source for Puza's project.

and racial slavery through re-readings of legal, archival, and institutional contexts for representing enslaved lives. Her thesis is an ambitious project, one that requires advanced skills of literary and historical analysis."

At UW-Madison, Puza specialized in literature and politics. "This interdisciplinary approach led me to approach abolitionism by combining political methods with emotion, a connection I found lacking in the social sciences," Puza writes. "I also drew on my own experience as a formerly homeless and runaway youth. Experiencing loss from a young age gave me a deeper awareness of resilience and how to find beauty, growth, and creation in places that seem unlikely to offer any."

Huang writes, "My own work as a researcher and teacher has benefited greatly from knowing and working with Holly. I look forward to seeing how she will bridge her studies in the humanities and politics with her work in law school."

The Iwanter Prize selection committee felt Puza's essay demonstrated truly original research, deft movement between theoretical and practical concerns, and accomplished academic prose. The thesis was distinguished by Puza's willingness to engage, adapt, and critique various approaches from multiple disciplines and methods, and her dialogue with Black Studies was particularly sophisticated.

Iwanter Prize for Undergraduate Research, Honorable Mention: Matthew Masonius

Matthew Masonius won the Iwanter Prize Honorable Mention for his thesis: *From 'Great Society' to 'Good Government': Watergate, the 1974 Elections, & the Ideological Evolution of the Democratic Party*. Masonius' project focuses on the midterm elections of 1974, a nationwide Democratic landslide in the wake of the Watergate scandal that had brought down the presidency of Richard Nixon earlier that year. Masonius makes a novel argument that these Democrats were substantially different from their predecessors—they campaigned on issues relatively new to the party and this rhetoric marked a significant departure from Democrats' prior emphasis on expensive, ambitious government programs which sought to use the power of the state to promote economic and social equality.



Matthew Masonius

Written in conjunction with the History Department, Masonius' thesis seeks to explore and analyze the past as a work of historical writing; yet his use of narrative, argument, and evidence in the paper are inextricably linked to his other major, Political Science. "I believe it is important not to silo oneself within the confines of a single field. Instead, an interdisciplinary approach has allowed me to see how



Gubernatorial Candidate Jerry Brown Speaking at Political Rally in Los Angeles, Calif., 1974. November 5, 1974. Photograph, 35 mm. Los Angeles Times Photographic Collection.

seemingly distinct areas of study intersect and interact with each other,” Masonius writes. “Significant questions usually require complex answers, and a multifaceted technique that brings together different perspectives is essential to this task.”

Masonius worked under the guidance of Patrick Iber, Associate Chair of History at UW-Madison. Iber writes, “Matthew’s paper is analytically sophisticated and builds its argument over sixty well-researched pages.” Iber mentions how other notable authors have provided explanations for the 1974 midterm elections as an important conjuncture in American politics. “Matt adds

to those accounts by showing how the particular circumstances surrounding this unusual election made those changes possible.”

The selection committee admired how Masonius’ deeply researched and critically sharp scholarship engaged political and historical analysis at a high level, bringing an ecology of historical factors and the established historiography into a sophisticated—and original—constellation.

About the Iwanter Prize



*Iwanter in the 1967
Madison Central High
School Yearbook*

The Iwanter Prize itself is about legacy and the passing of intellectual curiosity from one generation to another. The prize was established in 2000 by alumnus Sidney E. Iwanter (B.A. ’71, History), a native of the Greenbush neighborhood in Madison. While an undergraduate, Iwanter’s own curiosity and will to document the knowledge of the previous generation led him to secretly record the lectures of Professor of History and political activist Harvey Goldberg. In 2004, Iwanter generously donated these “bootlegs” to UW-Madison (the lectures are available from the [Harvey Goldberg Center](#)). Additionally, the George L. Mosse Program in History conducted [an oral history with Iwanter](#); you can find out more about his childhood in Madison, attendance at UW-Madison, career in Hollywood, and why he set up the Iwanter Prize.

Iwanter, who now lives in Los Angeles, continues to support the undergraduate humanities and the love of learning at UW-Madison, stemming from his belief that, “a well-rounded humanities education is the keystone to an informed electorate and a healthy society.”

More information about the Iwanter Prize and past winners can be found at:
<https://humanities.wisc.edu/research/iwanter-prize>