ISECS: International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies
Seminar for Early Career Scholars | University of Michigan
June 21 - July 2, 2021

CALL FOR PAPERS

The International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ISECS) is pleased to announce the 2021 International Seminar for Early-Career Eighteenth-Century Scholars. Researchers from all fields of eighteenth-century studies are invited to submit an application for this virtual, two-week event.

This annual seminar brings together early-career researchers from a number of countries each year to discuss participants' work in progress and other recent scholarship relating to a shared theme. The 2021 meeting will be hosted by the University of Michigan under the direction of Dena Goodman (History / Women's and Gender Studies) and David Porter (English Language and Literature / Comparative Literature). **Due to the ongoing public health situation, the seminar will take place online over the course of two weeks, from Monday, June 21 through Friday, July 2, with sessions scheduled for 2-3 hours each weekday.**

The theme of the 2021 Seminar will be:

CREDULITY IN THE AGE OF REASON

CRÉDULITÉ, s. f. est une foiblesse d'esprit par laquelle on est porté à donner son assentiment, soit à des propositions, soit à des faits, avant que d'en avoir pesé les preuves. [...] Il y a le même danger à tout rejetter & à tout admettre indistinctement; c'est le cas de la crédulité, le vice le plus favorable au mensonge.
– Diderot, « Crédulité », *Encyclopédie*, 4 : 451-52

CREDULITY is an intellectual weakness by which one is led to give one's assent either to propositions or to facts, before having weighed the evidence. [...] It is as dangerous to reject everything as to accept everything indiscriminately; this is the case with *credulity*, the vice most vulnerable to lies.

For many, the year 2020 will be remembered across the world for its epic and impassioned battles between credulity and reason, with respect to climate change, public health, racial legacies, and other burning issues. For Diderot, writing 270 years ago, the problem of credulity was not simply that of blind faith, but of radical skepticism. One of the major aims of the *Encyclopédie* and of the Enlightenment more generally was to forge a path between these extremes. The philosophes sought to stamp out irrational belief by developing critical reason, building empirical knowledge, and challenging the institution they believed to be most responsible for credulity: the Church. However, the expansion of education and media culture, the quickened pace of wondrous new inventions and discoveries, and perennial challenges to traditional authorities meant that readers often struggled to know what or whom to believe.

The philosophes blamed the public (and women in particular) for being credulous, but then asked them to believe in the existence of kangaroos, beavers, and other strange animals they had never seen. How could a young woman like Geneviève de Malboissière know if the handsome young black man making the rounds of the Paris salons was an escaped slave or, as he claimed, an African prince -- or a prince who had been enslaved and managed to escape – especially when plays, novels, and memoirs about African princes abounded? Should she believe him despite the skepticism of the men around her? When novels were called histories and true accounts and letters found in trunks, was the reader simply credulous when she wept at the heroine's death? What might not be possible if a human being could rise up in a balloon on the Champs de mars and then land safely miles away? Why couldn't a magnetic bath cure many ills?

The problem of credulity ultimately was and remains a problem of power and knowledge. If, as Foucault maintained, we continue to live in the epistemological field established in the eighteenth century, then investigating credulity in the Age of Reason can also shed light on how and where it operates today, how technologies and institutions are developed to combat it, and how people learn to navigate between credulity and doubt.

In this seminar we propose to explore the problem of credulity and the many ways, forms, and venues in which it flourished in the eighteenth century: How was it conceptualized? Where and why did it arise? What solutions were proposed to address it? We encourage participants to consider, in particular, new and unexpected arenas in which Enlightenment epistemologies were tested and challenged, such as the sciences, the novel, and travel, and new technologies that either tested credulity or were developed to put knowledge on a firm foundation. How did the Enlightenment, premised on a wide-ranging attack on credulity, leave us a world in which knowledge and expertise seem more fragile than ever?

Application Process
The seminar will be limited to 12 participants, selected through a competitive application process. Applications should include the following information:

- Curriculum Vitae, including date of PhD and list of recent publications
- A description (500-800 words) of the proposed seminar paper which makes clear how it addresses the theme of the seminar and how it fits into your wider research project or program.

Application Process - continued
- One confidential letter of recommendation from someone familiar with your work (sent separately by recommender)

Applications will be evaluated on the basis of the proposed paper's fit with the seminar theme, the rigor, significance, and originality of the underlying scholarship, and the likelihood that applicant's background and experience will contribute to the breadth and quality of workshop discussions.

Preference will be given to scholars who are at the beginning of their academic careers, with a PhD or equivalent degree awarded no earlier than 2015.

Scholars who have participated in a previous ISECS Early Career Seminar are not eligible to apply. Scholars who were accepted to the 2020 seminar will be given priority for this one if they choose to reapply. Other scholars who applied in previous years are welcome to apply again.

Completed papers by selected participants will be circulated 4-6 weeks in advance of the seminar, and each participant will be allotted approximately ninety minutes for a presentation and discussion of their paper. The official languages of the Seminar are English and French.

Proceedings
As is the case each year, a volume of papers from the seminar will be published by Honoré Champion (Paris) in the "Lumières internationales" series.

Funding
Participants will each be offered a modest stipend of $500 to facilitate their participation in the Seminar.

Deadline
Applications must be submitted by **February 15, 2021**. Please email applications to the organizers of the Seminar: Dena Goodman (goodmand@umich.edu) and David Porter (dporter@umich.edu). Please do not hesitate to send any questions about the Seminar to one or both of us well in advance of the deadline.