

The Indiana Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies announces its twenty-first annual
Bloomington Workshop (May 18-20, 2023)

Bodily Autonomies, Autonomous Bodies

The idea of “autonomy” arises in the early modern period in relation to political entities, rather than individuals. A borrowing from the Greek (αὐτο + νόμος) meaning self law, autonomy referred to ability of an institution or a state to govern itself. In the eighteenth century, that scope began to apply increasingly to the capacities of individuals. Indeed, one strong tradition in eighteenth-century studies identifies our period with the invention of the author and the origins of the modern, autonomous individual. Looking back to the early modern, eighteenth-century conceptions of autonomy draw from the foundations that would lead to the birth of the nation state, and from contrasting models of internal and external virtue. From out of the eighteenth-century, the application of the term will spread from Montesquieu’s political philosophy, to Kant’s moral philosophy, and extend across the natural and social sciences. And yet the questions of autonomy –of self governance of a human or a political body– do not move in straight lines or toward easy answers.

Self-governance is often a sweet lie that hides the abuse of power, from the personal level to the geopolitical. Foucault has taught us that the individual operates within a network of power systems –religious, gendered, political, racial, geographic, and colonial, among others– that can influence, abridge, inhibit, or reinforce their ability to exercise agency or will over their life and body. More recently, methodological approaches such as New Materialisms, object-oriented ontologies, and alternative ontological frameworks such as those drawn from Black and indigenous studies often serve to unsettle the concept of autonomy, probing the spaces between the ephemeral capacity to self-govern, the material acts of self-determination, and the very notion of a “self” who can be governed and determined at all. Therefore, with this Workshop theme, we hope to *explore* the limits of self-governance within the network of power structures that make up the world, to *recognize* the ways that autonomies exist against the grain of social discourse, and to *acknowledge* long-running ramifications –both positive and negative– of the aspirational quality of this ideal. At the same time, we look to *question* whether this idealization has contributed to dogmas of personal responsibility and economic self-interest at the expense of collective forms of action and care.

Within the sphere of the eighteenth century, we invite papers about autonomy as it applies to individuals across the spectrums of power and privilege; of groups whose identity or enforced social status inhibits or countermands their capacity to exercise agency; of national or political entities whose formation, liberation, and sovereignty are impacted by colonial pressures, and work that questions and probes autonomy’s drawbacks and boundaries as they figure in eighteenth-century histories, archives, and texts.

We look forward to reading your abstracts and ideas. A non-exhaustive list of topics they might address would include:

- negotiating questions of self and autonomy for enslaved persons
- the autonomy of gendered bodies

- autonomy within or of a colonized state
- freedom of movement: border-crossings, gatherings, quarantines, departures
- approaches that complicate or question ideas of personal or political sovereignty
- scientism and visions of the body as machine
- the individual figured against a backdrop of control or systems of power
- disenfranchisement: debt, citizenship, exile, etc.

In last year's Workshop, which focused on Collaborations, questions arose about the limits of what can be considered labor performed together (*col + labōrāre*) in the context of radically unequal power relationships or within systems of sanctioned oppression. This year we hope to continue these conversations, which hold the echoes of the Center's first workshop, "Signs of the Self," and resound into a present where the concept of the autonomous individual is being questioned for political gain.

During the Workshop, we will discuss pre-circulated texts (due in mid-April) and perhaps have an occasional lecture or library, museum, or archive visit. Given the theme, we are especially open to co- and multi-authored contributions, including those that work across hitherto conventional boundaries of genre, discipline, and media. We intend and hope that the workshop will largely take place in person (and that participants will be present for the entire event), but anticipate making provision for some online participation as well.

The application deadline is Friday, January 20, 2023. Please send a paper proposal (1-2 pages) and current brief CV (3 pages, max) to Dr. Barbara Truesdell, Administrator, Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies. Please e-mail to voltaire@indiana.edu.

We will acknowledge all submissions within a fortnight: if you do not receive an acknowledgment by January 31, 2022, please e-mail voltaire@indiana.edu or the Center's Director, Jesse Molesworth (jmoleswo@indiana.edu).

Papers will be selected by an interdisciplinary committee. We cover most expenses for visiting scholars chosen to present their work: accommodations, travel (up to a certain limit), and most meals. Expanded abstracts and/or entire papers may be published in the Center's *The Workshop*, along with discussion transcripts or summaries.