

Futures Present

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I am Rebecca Spang, Director of the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Indiana University, and it is my very great pleasure to welcome you today to the Center's fifteenth annual workshop. The occasion could not be more auspicious. Long heralded and announced by wondrous portents (including tweets, status updates, and postcards in many designs), this is surely an event to be welcomed joyously but perhaps also one that will awaken darker sentiments because the future—well, the eighteenth-century's future—has arrived! Or perhaps I should say: the eighteenth-century futures *have* arrived.

In September (that is, in the past), we chose the title and rubric for this year's Workshop with the hope that "Eighteenth-Century Futures" would allow us to bridge two topics that interested members of our Center. The first was the historico-critical question of futurity and temporal logics in eighteenth-century texts, authors, and societies. How did individuals, groups and institutions in the past conceive, understand, construct, and—perhaps, even—limit the time ahead of them? The second was to ask what futures we could imagine, envision, plan, project, desire, or reject for the field of Eighteenth-Century Studies today. By combining these questions into a single call for papers, we refused two possible futures and set ourselves on the way to some third. Then, in early February, the Center's aptly named Steering Committee selected some proposals and solicited others, all with an eye to crafting an engaging and worthwhile future event. But as we all know (even if mice do not), plans often go astray. My own co-authored contribution has had to be postponed to some future workshop (but not the workshop on futures) because my collaborator—a scientist who was enthusiastically anticipating being here today—had already committed himself to being in Copenhagen on this very date. Our twenty-first-century future may be "open"—our time may be, in the phrase that Benedict Anderson borrowed from Walter Benjamin "empty and homogeneous"—but it nonetheless occurs in space and is therefore finite and singular. [If we ask "Where in the world is Simon DeDeo?" there can at any given point in time be only one answer to that question. But if we ask "When in the world is Simon DeDeo?" the answer becomes more complex.]

Looking back, I have some vague memories of how we thought—I thought—our conversations might go for the next two days. Having received and read the papers, I think I am now in a better position to anticipate the themes, issues, and concerns that may animate our discussions, but I certainly don't think I can *predict* them (nor would I want to wager money on any such speculations—though I would be willing to bet that Richard Nash would be happy to do so). Nonetheless, I will venture the following surmises (and only retrospect will tell if these are tangents, shaky limbs, or roads less traveled):

1. How genre-specific were (or are) eighteenth-century futures? Was the poetical future distinct from the geological or the novelistic? Think about the genres in which we conduct our own professional interactions. We might say one thing about the future of eighteenth-century studies as we talk among ourselves in this room, but write something quite different if we were introducing an anthology of recent articles or preparing a grant proposal.

2. The future hasn't happened, but several authors suggest that its conceptualization is crucial for how we periodize the past. Sam Baker asserts in his paper "memories are

about the future” and as evidence for this claim’s status as received wisdom, he cites an article in a periodical with the wonderful temporally-hybrid title *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*: that first word could not be more eighteenth-century (it recalls Fontenelle’s *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* among many other texts) but “clinical neuroscience” sounds to me futuristic—a futurism that is chronologically (but not affectively) close to that of George Jetson and his boy Elroy. What shall we make of this seemingly foundational interplay of past and future? Do the categories re-enforce and support each other, or do they dissolve *into* each other? Is time linear, cyclical, or knotted? How can we write about multiple temporalities in the linear materiality of the printed page? Is “meanwhile”—another term central to modern time as conceptualized by Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*—really the answer to that question? Does the logic of “meanwhile” have any meaning when thinking about future time?

3. While several papers attend to the poetics of futurity, others are equally concerned with politics. Our first author, Daniel Fulda, suggests that the “Open Future” was both constituted by, and crucial for the construction of, new sorts of politics. Michael Cooperson tells us that Louis Sébastien Mercier “accidentally” invented time travel in order to make a political (rather than a philosophical, moral, or theological) argument. And Richard Nash’s paper “embeds” eighteenth-century studies in a discussion of current politics. So we have poetics and we have politics—it is surely our task for the next two days to combine them into a vision (a plan? a project?) for the future.

Now, I need to take care of present business:

1. We are recording our conversations, many of which will be transcribed and published in our annual proceedings volume (of which three have appeared so far). We need your assent, so please complete release forms and return to me. We record and transcribe because we know we cannot predict how our discussions will go, but we also know that they are among the most cherished (and least well immortalized) of academic activities. To act, as Hannah Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*, “means to take an initiative, to begin... to set something into motion”—and each question posed, each comment offered, will be just such an initiative, the beginning of a new future for the conversation.

2. Each conversation has a chair (in most cases, not always, who also serves as commentator). It’s the chair’s task to keep our discussion convivial, shared, and more or less “on track.” Raise your hand if you have a question or comment; if you have a small intervention you want to make that follows directly on something that has just been said, make the “hook” sign and you will then be invited to speak immediately but please do make sure what you have to say does indeed follow directly and is concisely formulated. We also want to make sure that everyone—not just paper authors and commentators—feels welcome in the conversation, so to encourage student participation we continue with the house rule of allowing students to “jump the queue.”

3. And so as to facilitate those encounters, more introductions are in order now [all in the room then introduced themselves].