

Equality and Difference Around the Enlightenment
French 370gm, Professor Natania Meeker
Fall 2020
Tuesday/Thursday: 12:30-1:50 PM

The course will meet twice a week and is taught in English.
It fulfills the GE-B (Humanistic Inquiry) **and** diversity requirements!



How can the ideal of equality for all be compatible with the recognition that we are not all alike? This class, tracking the course of ideas about difference and equality through the French Enlightenment and beyond, will investigate the history and origins of these and other questions in the cultural and political upheavals of the eighteenth century. It is designed to allow students to understand the impact of eighteenth-century debates on contemporary ideas about identity, citizenship, and social justice. We will focus, throughout the semester, on the ways in which representations of sexual, racial, and ethnic difference were and still are fundamental to the theory and practice of political equality, in France and the United States. Our analysis will revolve around the twin figures of “the feminine” on the one hand and “the exotic” on the other. How, we will ask, did Enlightenment depictions of women and/or non-European peoples simultaneously promulgate equality as a political goal and difference as a “fact” of nature? We will go on to examine the ways in which these portrayals of feminine specificity and racial alterity exert lingering after-effects—continuing to influence and even to define our ideas about the duties we owe to one another as humans and as citizens, the right of any given individual to have or pursue “the good life,” and the nature of justice in a diverse and globalized world.

This course moves from an investigation of eighteenth-century literary texts crucial to the dissemination of modern ideas about human nature and human rights into a study of political texts that take equality and difference as their central theme. In the last unit of the course, we will investigate the relevance of Enlightenment debates to contemporary discussions of identity, citizenship, human rights, social justice, and political representation. We will read texts ranging from epistolary novels, sentimental tales, and philosophical treatises to manifestos, poems, and “declarations.” Please contact Natania Meeker (nmeeker@usc.edu) for more information.