Connections: Ecologies and Networks in/of the Eighteenth Century

Everything connects, but some connections are stronger than others. Eighteenth-Century Studies over the past fifty years has been characterized by major shifts in how the most salient ties have been identified and imagined. From Peter Gay’s “little flock” of philosophes to the Habermasian public sphere; from formalist readings of a single author’s oeuvre to the transdisciplinary and cross-genre juxtapositions of New Historicism; from European capitals to metropole/colony and transoceanic commodity flows—what has been at stake in all cases is not just the analytic category’s scale or scope, but how connections between the different nodes in a network or organisms in an environment are theorized. Beings and environments, texts and contexts, objects and subjects: all connect, but those relations have been conceptualized, explained, and invoked in many different guises and to many different ends.

Ours is a time of environmental change. Landscapes and ecosystems of scholarship and learning are also undergoing dramatic transformation. In this moment of institutional and climate instability, we invite colleagues, friends, and strangers to help us re-imagine the interaction of beings, things, and habitat in spaces discursive, political, social, or physical.

In selecting this theme as our focus, we solicit papers that explore a particular eighteenth-century ecology, network, or system and that use that examination to raise theoretical, methodological, or conceptual questions about the connections identified. We are especially interested in how our key terms (and the forms of study they might invite) are both similar and distinct. Is an “ecology” a particular kind of network, and how does its conceptualization differ from that of an “economy”? Are networks always more intentional than ecologies? What about their modes of exclusion and inclusion? (Rousseau, after all, made a very conscious effort to leave the philosophes’ network, but could he escape their ecosystem?) What might be gained from writing literary or philosophical histories of the terms themselves? Does it matter that “ecology” is, for the eighteenth century, a notably anachronistic notion while “network” was already well established (albeit used almost exclusively for the physical outputs of human or animal labor)?* What happens if we introduce the Humboldtian “cosmos” into the mix?

* Oecologie (now Ökologie) was first used in German by Haeckel in 1866; borrowed into French in 1874 and into English in 1875. The OED shows “network” being used by several writers familiar in Eighteenth-Century Studies: “Ribbons, Lace and Embroidery, wrought together in a most curious Piece of Network”—Addison, Spectator 275 (1712); “So shoot the Spider-broods at breezy dawn, Their glittering net-work o'er the autumnal lawn,” Erasmus Darwin, The Botanic Garden (1781).
Possible paper topics include but are not limited to:

- environmental histories and eco-criticism
- textual ecologies and ecologies of text production
- landscape, viewpoint, perspective, prospect
- sensory networks and consciousness
- patronage
- affinities and correspondences
- Great Chains of Being, Buying, etc. (and links therein)
- dependence and interdependence; mastery and enslavement
- networks of knowledge or know-how; knowledge about networks
- intentional and/or institutional connection makers: bridges, gatekeepers, brokers

During the Workshop, we will discuss pre-circulated texts (due in mid-April) and perhaps have an occasional lecture or laboratory practicum. Expanded abstracts and/or entire papers will be published in the Center’s The Workshop, along with discussion transcripts.

Note: in a break with recent past practice, this year’s workshop is scheduled for Thursday-Saturday rather than Wednesday-Friday.

The application deadline is Friday, January 17, 2020. 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. We prefer that these materials be sent by e-mail to voltaire@indiana.edu. We will acknowledge all submissions within a fortnight: if you do not receive an acknowledgment by January 31, 2020, please e-mail voltaire@indiana.edu or the Center’s Director, Professor Rebecca L. Spang (rлspang@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. For further information please see www.indiana.edu/~voltaire