Equality and Difference, Around the Enlightenment
French 370m, Professor Natania Meeker
Mondays, Wednesdays:  12-1:50 PM

This course will be taught in English, with an option for receiving credit in French.

Are men and women fundamentally different? Do differences between races matter . . . or even exist? How can the ideal of equality for all be compatible with a belief 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 upheavals of the eighteenth century.

We will focus, throughout the semester, on the ways in which representations of sexual, racial and ethnic difference were and still are fundamental to debates, in France and the United States, around the meaning and function of political equality. 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 who we are and what we are capable of doing.

This course moves from an examination of eighteenth-century literary writings—in French and Anglophone contexts—crucial to the development of modern ideas about human nature 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.” Authors we will study will include: J.M. Coetzee, Edwige Danticat, Denis Diderot, Claire de Duras, Françoise de Graffigny, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and others. Please contact nmeeker@usc.edu with any questions; students from other departments and/or disciplines welcome.

Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson, “Portrait du Citoyen Belley,” 1797