

Introduction:
Scholarship in a Time of Crisis

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We conceived of this issue in the midst of a turbulent summer: a time marked by global pandemic, racial unrest, and economic instability. The idea behind our call was, if not to assuage the panic, at least to give language to it. Channeling our beloved Uncle Toby, we thought that by putting words to feelings at least some part of those feelings could be understood. We also recognized—cue the legions of essays that have appeared recently in the popular press on Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*—that these past months are far from the first “crisis” to have afflicted us. As indicated overtly by Dana Gliserman Kopans in the title to her piece, and more implicitly by Olivia Carpenter in hers, the challenges we face today are “precedented,” to say the least. As scholars who work on eighteenth-century literature and culture, we thought we could bring a special perspective to the events at hand.

Emily’s “time of crisis” has involved home schooling and single parenting while trying to teach and write. Steven, on his end, has been juggling childcare, displacement, and teaching as well. Our challenges represent only a sliver of those experienced by and commented on by the scholars who contributed to this work, and those experienced by the many friends, colleagues, and relatives who lacked the time and resources that would have enabled them to share their thoughts here.

When we framed this call, we therefore wanted to cast a wide net: we wanted to give voice to as many experiences in the academy as possible, and to represent, as Cleo O’Callaghan Yeoman does in her piece, the various forms of selfhood that persist even as a sense of global uncertainty unites us all. We invited potential contributors to think about intersections between personal and scholarly challenges, and we asked for pieces that were shorter, with the idea that these essays might stand as “place-holders” for authors and readers alike. To put this another way, there was an implicit Richardsonian “writing to the moment” ethos in this call for papers—not just in the sense that we were inviting colleagues to comment upon our current environmental and social conditions, but in the sense that we recognized writing time these days as precious and hard-won. Our future hope is that these short, often more personal pieces can represent the seeds of future articles, essays, lectures, reviews, and perhaps courses as well.

Our initial hopes were fulfilled by the broad range of responses we received, responses from within the field of eighteenth-century studies that traverse topics and disciplines alike. Among the thirteen pieces featured here we noted the emergence of four themes. These themes are not exclusive of each other, nor does our categorization of these pieces mean that these ideas are discrete within a particular piece. Indeed, and in speaking to our final theme, we were impressed by the cross-pollination encouraged by our recent circumstances. We hope our scholarship may continue to benefit from the ways in which we are being newly encouraged to adapt, collaborate, and reach out.

Several pieces here reflect overtly on the future of our field. Rachael King and Seth Rudy speak to this issue directly in their meditation on the notion of “ends.” Alejandra Dubcovsky, too, reflects on what we can learn from “the ends” experienced by Indigenous peoples, and how we can learn from them lessons about surviving and keeping on. Suvir Kaul, in

tackling the framing of our call for papers first-hand, urges us to see the possibilities of eighteenth-century studies by holding accountable the institution, and pondering obligations the university has to the faculty it ostensibly supports. He also encourages us to continue to believe in the power of critical thinking “to change minds.” Angelina Del Balzo, from a background in theater and performance studies, considers how the changed nature of theatrical performance emblemizes necessary shifts in how we conceive of sympathy and empathy, today. Soile Ylivuori looks at the risks of impending “ecocatastrophe” to call for an epistemological shift from “humanism to posthumanism,” a move that anticipates our second major theme.

Many of these pieces flagged a shift in methodology required, in part, by the pandemic-inspired need for social isolation. Agnieszka Anna Ficek considers what it means to be an art historian when access to museums is denied. Katie Lanning situates the concept of “social distancing” historically to ponder how past and present modalities alike seek to provide a “technology of presence.” And the graduate student organizers of the “Distance 2020” conference describe what it was like to hold a postgraduate conference—presciently on the theme of “distance”—in the time of COVID-19; together, they help us think about what their experience might mean for conferences of the future.

Self-reflexivity, such a marker of much eighteenth-century literature, remains a potent motivator for scholars today, as noted above by Yeoman, and also by Hannah Murray in her piece on how eighteenth-century utopian fiction can prompt self-conscious reflections upon the present day. Gliserman Kopans’ piece shares in this project, as does Carpenter’s, in her historically informed call to have us reconsider our use of the pronoun “we.” James Bryant Reeves, finally, by speaking to the subject of “race and religious joy,” uses historical attitudes toward both race and religion to help us in the current fight against binary thinking: religion and

secularism are not, and have never been, in strict opposition. He also, crucially, brings up the concept of “religious joy” and pushes us to consider what joy means in a time of crisis.

The hopeful note sounded by Reeves’s essay brings us to our final theme: an overarching, sometimes explicit, investment in collaboration. This concept may feel painfully ironic at a time when many of us are still in some form of quarantine; again, though, we were struck by the innovations—technological and epistemological—inspired by the requirements of physical distance, and how collaborative thinking seems to have emerged as a forward-looking response. The humanities here lag behind our colleagues in the natural and social sciences, for understandable and often important reasons. However, from the evolving format of conferences to new framings of empathy, we see in these pieces aspirational models for how we can better work together, even in times of painful divisions.

As journal editors, we feel this final mandate powerfully. Our job as editors is to respect individual viewpoints *and* bring varied viewpoints into conversation with each other. We also recognize that while a “crisis” can inspire scholarship—as indicated here—it can also forestall it. We offer these reflections in the spirit of community, and to inspire, we hope, those for whom personal scholarship is at the moment untenable.