

NEH Application Cover Sheet (FZ-231476)

Public Scholar Program

PROJECT DIRECTOR

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Field of expertise: French Literature

INSTITUTION

Wesleyan University
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APPLICATION INFORMATION

Title: *Denis Diderot: The Art of Thinking Freely*

Grant period: From 2015-10-01 to 2016-09-01

Project field(s): French Literature; European History; History, Criticism, and Theory of the Arts

Description of project: Denis Diderot: The Art of Thinking Freely. The French Enlightenment philosopher and critic Denis Diderot (1713-84) dreamt of natural selection before Darwin, the Oedipus complex before Freud, and genetic manipulation centuries before Dolly the Sheep was born. Overshadowed by Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau during his lifetime, Diderot was nonetheless his era's most dynamic and versatile writer, engaging with and writing on virtually all of his century's forbidden subjects, including the (non-biblical) origin of the human species, the sexual abuse endured by nuns, as well as the race science underpinning the extremely profitable slave trade. This profoundly intriguing scientific and literary career, and the life that was its backdrop, are the subject of a "public scholar" intellectual biography that I am proposing to the NEH for funding.

REFERENCE LETTERS

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NEH Supplemental Information for Individuals

This form should be used by applicants to the NEH Fellowships, Fellowships for Advanced Social Science Research on Japan, Awards for Faculty, and Summer Stipends Programs.

Field of Project:

Field of Project #2:

Field of Project #3:

Project Director Field of Study:

The mailing address provided on the SF 424-Individual is for your work home

Institutional Affiliation

Are you affiliated with an institution? (If yes, provide information below.) Yes No

Institution Name:

Street 1:

Street 2:

City:

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Province:

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Zip / Postal Code:

DUNS Number:

Employer/Taxpayer Identification Number (EIN/TIN):

Status: Senior Scholar Junior Scholar

Reference Letters

Reference 1

First Name:

Last Name:

Email:

Title:

Department Name:

Institution:

Reference 2

First Name:

Last Name:

Email:

Title:

Department Name:

Institution:

Nominating Official (Summer Stipends Applicants Only)

Are you exempt from nomination? If not, provide information below. Yes No

First Name:

Last Name:

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Title:

Institution:

“Denis Diderot: The Art of Thinking Freely”

I. Project Description and Justification

The French Enlightenment philosopher and critic Denis Diderot (1713-84) dreamt of natural selection before Darwin, the Oedipus complex before Freud, and genetic manipulation centuries before Dolly the Sheep was born. Overshadowed by Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau during his lifetime, Diderot was nonetheless his era’s most dynamic and versatile writer, engaging with and writing on virtually all of his century’s forbidden subjects, including the (non-biblical) origin of the human species, the sexual abuse endured by nuns, as well as the race science underpinning the extremely profitable slave trade. This profoundly intriguing scientific and literary career, and the life that was its backdrop, are the subject of a “public humanities” intellectual biography that I am currently writing, and for which I am seeking support from the NEH.

In the most cooperative of life stories, the death of an author culminates with an apotheosis, with the universal recognition of greatness that lives on long after the writer is gone. This was far from the case for Denis Diderot. While a reported 20,000 people turned out on Paris’s rue de Richelieu on August 2, 1784 to watch his funeral cortege move slowly toward the Eglise Saint-Roch, the philosophe’s celebrity was then limited, primarily, to the restaging of one of his plays as well as his role in producing the world’s first truly comprehensive *Encyclopédie*. This latter project, to which Diderot contributed an astonishing seven thousand articles on subjects as varied as the subjectivity of taste and the fabrication of steel, consumed twenty-five years of his life.

By the time the final volume of the *Encyclopédie*’s illustrations appeared in 1772, Diderot had long called the project his “hair shirt,” a horrifically painful task to which he had self-consciously sacrificed his literary career and health, careening from crisis to crisis in an atmosphere of royal and religious persecution. The heated public debate about the *Encyclopédie* – it was ultimately banned twice by Louis XV – had nonetheless transformed Diderot into one of most recognizable *men of letters* of the era (for both the proponents and enemies of the Enlightenment). Through ruse, obfuscation, and, sometimes, cooperation with the royal censor, Diderot had succeeded, where no one else had, in disseminating the methods and ideology of freethinking – including the scrutiny of religious dogma, the debunking of religious-based science, and the questioning of the monarchy’s political authority – to a huge audience across Western Europe and, to a lesser scale, in exotic lands like Pennsylvania and Saint Petersburg. This accomplishment earned him the nickname of “the philosopher” (*le philosophe*) before the notion of *les philosophes* or *the philosophers of the Enlightenment*, even existed.

Being the era’s greatest wholesaler of (sometimes dangerous) knowledge, however, did not confer upon Diderot the status of literary great or, after 1791, the right to be buried in France’s new national mausoleum, the Panthéon. Some of this had to do with the fact that Diderot had published a number of profoundly unorthodox and (anonymous) works early in his career that forever cemented his reputation as a scandalous freethinker and atheist. In 1746, for example, Diderot brought out his *Philosophical Thoughts*, a collection of pithy essays that maintained, among other things, that “superstition is more injurious to God than

atheism” and that, “[g]iven the choice between a bad God and no God, I would rather no God existed.” Two years later, to make money for his first mistress, Diderot also penned the *Indiscreet Jewels* (1748), a pornographic and orientalist prototype of the *vagina monologues* where women's talking "jewels" engaged in a frank discussion of their erotic adventures. The following year, Diderot returned to philosophy proper, challenging longstanding arguments in favor of God's existence in his *Letter on the Blind* (1749). It was this text that earned Diderot a three-month stint in Vincennes prison, as well as the reputation as a rabble-rouser and unbeliever (mistakenly) associated with epigrams such as: “Man will never be free until the last king is hanged by the entrails of the last priest.”

A much more complete understanding of Diderot and his works emerged after his death; understanding this unfolding legacy is a key element of my book. Before Diderot died, and unbeknownst to all but a select few of his friends, Diderot had prepared two sets of manuscripts containing his heretofore unpublished novels, short stories, and philosophical works. This had been Diderot's plan for thirty years; after his imprisonment in 1749, he had decided to speak to the generations that would come after him. As he put it: “Posterity is for the philosopher what the next world is for the man of religion.” This strategy produced what is undoubtedly the greatest late harvest of the Enlightenment era.

Armed with hindsight and access to his full corpus, we now know a very different Diderot. Only a few years after the physical trace of Diderot had forever disappeared (his remains were apparently among those thrown into a mass grave during the French Revolution), the writer's newly "discovered" texts began infusing the thought of Goethe, Hegel, and Nietzsche. Marx cited him as his favorite writer twice. Freud, too, was fascinated by Diderot's insights into the human psyche.

To the contemporary reader, Diderot's breadth and modernity continue to startle. In the late 1750s, he theorized a new type of theater -- the *bourgeois drama* -- that rejected both classical norms and aristocratic values in lieu of a serious treatment of middle-class problems and social issues (the most famous example of these sentimental sit-coms was Beaumarchais's *The Marriage of Figaro*). In the same era, he also arguably invented art criticism, providing erudite and analytical commentary on the paintings exhibited at the biennial *Salons* at the Louvre. (The museum now has an entire room dedicated to "Diderot's painters," among them Fragonard, Chardin, Greuze and Vernet.)

But Diderot is best known as a master of dialogue. Whether it be his violent condemnation of African chattel slavery (staged as an argument between the slave and slaveholder), his satire of European sexual repression (which is set on Tahiti and puts a priest in close contact with an alluring indigenous girl and her encouraging and philosophical father), or his metafictional riff on determinism (the celebrated *Jacques the Fatalist*), Diderot's use of the give-and-take of conversation conveys the fact that his ostensibly *enlightened* era was not simply about rationality and progress. In what is his most famous philosophical dialogue, *Rameau's Nephew*, Diderot staged a heated philosophical battle between “himself” and a man who was the living counter-example to all he believed in. One of the most memorable characters in all of literature, the hedonistic nephew preaches the beauty of evil, the joys of social parasitism, and the right to be a radical individual. The audacity of *Rameau's Nephew* is only equaled by another dialogue-driven work, *D'Alembert's Dream*, which gives rise to a world of speculative genetic manipulation, animal-human cross-

breeding, and proto-evolutionary theory. The dynamic and heady universe of *D'Alembert's Dream* foreshadows, in many ways, the world of destabilizing biotechnology in which we now live, a world in which the very notion of life is buffeted and challenged by science on a daily basis.

Like many of the other main protagonists of the Enlightenment era, Diderot preached the right of the individual to determine the course of his or her life. This aspect of his thought is most associated with Diderot's first novel, *The Nun*, the pseudo-memoir of a young woman with no religious vocation who is forced to take the veil, and who is brutally and sadistically tortured in one convent and subjected to the advances of a lesbian Prioress in another. But the type of *liberty* that underpins Diderot's corpus is much more than a hackneyed understanding of freedom; his message was and is intellectual emancipation from all received authorities, be they religious, political, or societal, and all in the interest of the common good. Much more so than the comparatively conservative deists Voltaire and Rousseau, Diderot embodies the most progressive and perhaps even radical wing of Enlightenment thought, a position that stemmed from his belief that skepticism in all matters was "the first step toward truth."

Having already written a scholarly monograph and several articles on Diderot during an earlier part of my career – on subjects that are much more closely linked to my expertise in the history of science and medicine – I am now very much dedicated to the idea of bringing the beguiling and challenging work of this French philosopher to a much wider public. One of the thinly veiled objectives of this project is to identify the forgotten importance that Diderot's thought had for the American forefathers – Franklin and Jefferson among them – in the establishment of the early American Republic.

II. Work plan

The project I am proposing to the NEH is what I call a "vertical biography" of Denis Diderot. In lieu of the traditional, plodding, "horizontal" month-by-month structure that undergirds most attempts at retelling Diderot's life story, I am working through Diderot's life with a thematic (yet generally chronological) structure in mind. This is particularly important given the fact that Diderot himself was constantly simultaneously carrying on a dizzying number of projects: engaging deeply (in the margins) with friends' manuscripts, thinking through a new theory of human origins, carrying on an affair (mostly via correspondence) with the love of his life, Sophie Volland, and editing the *Encyclopédie*. Diderot himself famously declared that he had a hundred "physiognomies" – and was therefore difficult to represent. To a significant degree, I am bearing this caveat in mind by looking at the multiple facets of Diderot's encyclopedic mind and undertakings.

My book has nine chapters, each corresponding to a particular problem or series of events in Diderot's life. The first chapters are anchored in the daily reality of Diderot's existence, publications, and persecution, be it his early atheistic writings or his imprisonment. This emphasis shifts after the fulcrum chapter on the *Encyclopédie* (and about 1765) since, after that point, Diderot holes himself up in his apartment and begins writing a series of groundbreaking, yet unpublished, works for posterity. These final five chapters after the *Encyclopédie* chapter correspond more fully to the rich and varied legacy that he left

behind in his unpublished manuscripts. Each of the sections will bring together several texts in a way that, I hope, will be both compelling and synthetic.

The breakdown of the books is as follows:

Introduction: A meditation on the portraits of Diderot as entryway into his thought and life.

Ch. 1: Native of Langres: An introduction to Diderot in his youth, his religious training (a subject neglected by French biographers) at the hands of the Jesuits, his failed bid to become the Canon of the Langres Cathedral, and his departure for Paris in 1728.

Ch. 2: Teaching Unbelief: Diderot's transition from wayward ecclesiastic, to dilettante, to translator, to freethinker, to disseminator of illegal and heretical ideas in Paris, c. 1735-49.

Ch. 3: Vincennes Prison: The story of Diderot's arrest and imprisonment in 1749 (based on unpublished archival sources) as well as a cultural history of imprisonment including the food he ate, fellow prisoners, and the vow of silence that he (and other freethinkers) were forced to take in order to be released.

Ch. 4: The *Encyclopédie*: or How to Create an Enlightenment. The story of the greatest ideological reference work ever written and its persecution by the Church and Crown, 1747-72.

Ch. 5. A New Genesis: A Short History of the Human. A synthesis of Diderot's many speculative deep-time writings on the origins of humankind in an era where doctrine maintained that God created Man instantaneously, 5700 years before.

Ch. 6. Destiny and Responsibility in a world without God. A meditation on Diderot's many writings – including *Jacques the Fatalist* and *Rameau's Nephew* – on the individual's status in a potentially deterministic world.

Ch. 7. Going to the Louvre with Diderot. A synthesis and essay on Diderot's writings on music, theater, and, especially, his art criticism.

Ch. 8 Diderot's Politics. An investigation of both published (*Encyclopédie*) writings on political authority as well as Diderot's unpublished and ghostwritten thought on colonialism and the monarchy.

Ch. 9. On Sex and Love. A juxtaposition of Diderot's writings on love, sexuality, human physiology – especially that of the woman – and his wonderful decades-long correspondence with the love of his life, Sophie Volland.

Epilogue: On the notion of posterity, and Diderot's evolving legacy, even today.

Regarding the work plan itself, I have a working draft of the introduction, and more polished drafts of the first four chapters. More sustained work will begin in five months, when I step down as Dean of Arts and Humanities at Wesleyan University after four years. If funded by the NEH, I will combine a semester's sabbatical from Wesleyan with a second leave in order to conduct the archival research necessary to complete the project within two years. In particular, I would spend time both at the National Library and National Archives in France consulting documents related to Diderot's incarceration in Vincennes and the unpublished police file maintained by Police Inspector Hémery. In addition to this more traditional line of research, I am also hoping to solve the mystery of what happened to his remains, which disappeared during the French Revolution, by consulting the registers of break-ins at the Saint-Roch church, where he was buried.

III. Competencies and Skills

If there is a single thread that ties the first part of my career together, it is the exploration of how scientific knowledge and medicine structured the lives of human beings during the early-modern era. My work on the history of eighteenth-century medical practices of the eighteenth century has led the New York Academy of Medicine to name me a fellow in the history of Medicine.

Denis Diderot has figured prominently within this scholarly orientation. In my first book, *Sublime Disorder: Physical Monstrosity in Diderot's Universe* (Voltaire Foundation: Oxford, 2001), I explored Diderot's relationship to the era's natural history, his view of scientific institutions, and his understanding of just what it meant to be human within the era's medicine. In my second book, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011, 2nd ed., 2013), I studied the scientific and philosophical discourse on the Black African in an era of chattel slavery. Here, too, I was able to examine a different aspect of Diderot's thought, in this case, his anticolonial rejection of nascent race theory and his overall political stance vis-à-vis questions of political and colonial authority. I have also contributed several other articles to collections dedicated to Diderot's work, most recently, *Cambridge New Essays on Diderot* (2013).

More recently, however, I have also begun to write about the thought and life of this modern philosopher for a general audience. This effort began with a *New York Times* Op-Ed that I wrote on the 300th anniversary of Diderot's birth in 2013. This piece prompted NPR to run a segment on Diderot on "Weekend Edition," where I was one of the Diderot specialists interviewed. Following these two "public humanities" interventions, I was invited by two academic presses and one trade press – Other Press – to produce a new biography of Diderot. Bearing in mind the large audience that I hoped to reach, I decided to write the biography for Other Press.

IV. Final product

Other Press is a small, high-quality New York City press that will market my Diderot book in numerous trade, print, and online publications; the actual book will be distributed through Random House. Among other things, the press is particularly well-known for their high quality biographies, including, *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*, which won the 2012 National Book Critics Circle Award for biography.

Were I to have an entire year's leave next year, I anticipate that I will be able to write the remaining five chapters and epilogue and would then take the following six months to rewrite, fact check, and work with my editor. I fully and honestly believe that I will be able to complete my manuscript by January 2017.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Andrew S. Curran

ACADEMIC AND ADMINISTRATIVE APPOINTMENTS:

2011-July 2015: Dean of the Arts and Humanities : Wesleyan University
2010-present: Professor of French Studies: Wesleyan University
2004-2010: Associate Professor of French Studies: Wesleyan University
1998-2004: Assistant Professor of French Studies: Wesleyan University

FELLOWSHIPS / AWARDS:

- * Choice Outstanding Academic Book for *The Anatomy of Blackness*, 2013
- * Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York Public Library) fellowship (declined), 2012
- * James. L Clifford Prize for the best article in eighteenth-century studies, American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, 2011
- * Fellow of the New York Academy of Medicine in the History of Medicine; elected July 2010
- * Shasha Seminar for Human Concerns grant winner, Wesleyan University; Spring 2010
- * Mellon Foundation Summer Research Grant; Summer 2010
- * Paul Klemperer Fellow in the History of Medicine, New York Academy of Medicine; Summer 2009
- * Mellon Foundation Summer Research Grant; Summer 2008
- * Mellon Foundation Summer Research Grant; Summer 2005
- * National Endowment for the Humanities Semester Fellowship; Spring 2002
- * Center for the Humanities Fellow (Wesleyan); Fall 2001, Fall 2008
- * John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Assistant Professor (Union College); 1997-98
- * The Paris-American Club of New York Research Fellowship; 1995
- * French Government Chateaubriand Fellowship; 1994

BOOKS / ED. VOLUME:

Diderot: The Art of Thinking Freely (forthcoming, Other Press, 2017)

The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment,
The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011 (2nd edition, 2013)
(Result of NEH grant 2001)

Sublime Disorder: Physical Monstrosity in Diderot's Universe,
Voltaire Foundation, University of Oxford, 2001.

Faces of Monstrosity in Eighteenth-Century Thought, in *Eighteenth Century Life*. (guest editor). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, (May 1997).

SCHOLARLY ARTICLES / ESSAYS:

“Anthropology” in the Cambridge Companion to the French Enlightenment,
Cambridge University Press (2015)

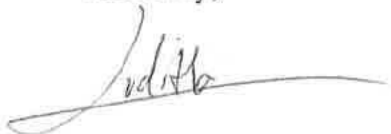
- “Buffon and the Natural History of the African” / “Buffon et l’histoire naturelle des Africains” in *Dix-huitième siècle*, 2012
- “Logics of the Human in Diderot’s Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville” in *New Essays on Diderot*, James Fowler, ed., Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- “Rethinking Race History: The Role of the Albino in the French Enlightenment Life Sciences”, *History and Theory* (Oct. 2009), 151-179. (received James. L Clifford Prize, for the best article in eighteenth-century studies, American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies)
- “Why Study the Representation of Africa in Eighteenth-Century Thought?” / “Pourquoi étudier la représentation de l’Afrique dans la pensée du XVIIIème siècle?”, Introduction to *L’Afrique du siècle des Lumières: Savoirs et représentations*. Catherine Gallouët, David Diop, et al., eds., Voltaire Foundation, University of Oxford, 2009, xix-xxix.
- “Imagining the Enlightenment’s Africa” / “Imaginer l’Afrique au siècle des Lumières” in *Le Problème de l’altérité dans la culture européenne: Anthropologie, politique et religion*, Naples: Bibliopolis (2006), 101-127. (Reprinted in *Cromohs* (Cyber Revue of Modern Historiography – Rivista Elettronica di Storiografia Moderna, Universities of Florence and Trieste).
- “Diderot and the Encyclopédie’s Construction of the Black African” in *Diderot and European Culture*, Anthony Strugnell and Frédéric Ogée, eds., Voltaire Foundation, University of Oxford, 2006, 35-53.
- “Afterword: Anatomical Readings in the Early Modern Era” in *Monstrous Bodies, Political Monstrosities*, Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan B. Landes, eds., Cornell University Press, 2004, 227-245.
- “Diderot’s Revisionism: Blindness and Enlightenment in the Lettre sur les aveugles”, *Diderot Studies* 28 (2000), 75-93.
- “The Faces of Eighteenth-Century Monstrosity”, Introduction to *Faces of Monstrosity in Eighteenth-Century Thought, Eighteenth-Century Life* (May 1997), 1-15, (co-authored with Patrick Graille).
- “Exhibiting the Monster: Nicolas-François et Geneviève Regnault’s Les écarts de la nature”, *Eighteenth-Century Life* (May 1997), 16-22, (co-authored with Patrick Graille).
- “Monsters and the Self in the Rêve de d’Alembert”, *Eighteenth-Century Life* (May 1997), 48-69.
- “Author’s Response” to *H-France Forum* on *The Anatomy of Blackness*, 10-12.
- “Author’s Response” to *Reviews in History* essay 1-13.
- JOURNALISM: “Diderot, an American Exemplar? Bien Sûr”, Op-Ed in *New York Times* and *International Herald Tribune*, January 24, 2013
- RADIO: Interview for *Weekend Edition*: “At 300, the Encyclopedia Pioneer May Yet Get a Hero’s Burial” (October, 5, 2013)

February 2, 2015

To Whom It May Concern,

Andrew Curran signed a contract with Other Press in February 2013 to produce a biography of Denis Diderot which he has tentatively entitled *Denis Diderot: The Art of Thinking Freely*. This book will be released in hardcover, paperback, and ebook in 2017. The Press is planning a marketing campaign that will include advertising in *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New York Review of Books* as well as other appropriate venues such as *BookForum* and online. While impossible to predict at this point, print runs of similar books lead me to speculate that the first printing of *The Art of Thinking Freely* will be (b) (4) copies.

Sincerely,



Judith Gurewich, Publisher