

“Sense and Consensus”
Berkeley-Stanford English Graduate Conference 2020

April 25th, 2020
300 Wheeler Hall
University of California, Berkeley

Keynote: Colleen Lye, University of California, Berkeley

The past decade has been subject to different and competing characterizations: it has been both a time of polarizing politics and a time of solidarity based on human rights activism. As the critical world participates in these cultural currents and the United States moves into another presidential election cycle, we are more urgently led to consider the conditions of possibility for political consensus and how rhetoric makes it (im)possible. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the processual quality of consensus—the ways in which it is a dynamic exercise in sense-making that is always subject to flux and instability. More radically, we are also encouraged to question whether consensus, as popularly construed, constitutes a good in itself—might imperatives toward “consensus,” in their various deployments, sometimes function to consolidate power and suppress dissenting voices and political forces?

This year’s Berkeley-Stanford conference seeks consensus—not as an endpoint, but as a prompt for inquiry. How do texts inflect, splinter, or theorize consensus thematically, narratively, or characterologically? In what ways do literary artifacts seem to anticipate a critical or readerly consensus—or lack thereof—through constructing imagined audiences? How do different literary genres and forms mediate between consensus and polyphony? What is the place of the senses in literature, and how do they clash or harmonize with each other in the reading process? Do the senses afford an empirical grounding for value judgments that form the basis of a subject’s will to assent or dissent? Or do subjectivity and individual experience preclude broader consensus? How do literary works help construct or defer democratic consensus? Should literary works be read as objects with sense-making abilities? What do literary works demonstrate about consent and sexual politics? What is the relationship between an aesthetic judgment and consensus within the scholarly community? In the humanities, are there any methods or practices whose approval attains unanimous consensus? Should our arguments about literature—surface vs. symptomatic reading, a literary work’s aesthetic value vs. its instrumental value—strive for critical consensus? Or are the best arguments ones that dissent most starkly?

In keeping with this possibility, we encourage papers on a wide range of focal texts and critical methodologies. We are especially open to unique, surprising, or unconventional variations on the theme of consensus, and we hope to make room for dissenting approaches through embracing heterogeneity.

Topics may include (but are certainly not limited to):

- Empathy, ethical uncertainty, and decision-making
- English and literary criticism as disciplines
- Critique and postcritique
- Canon formation
- Sense and nonsense
- Reader response theory
- Literature of the city, literature of the country
- Sensitivity, sensibility, and the senses
- Queerness
- The insider/outsider dynamic
- Consent and sexual politics
- Democracy, political theory, and activism
- Census data and biopolitics
- Building solidarity through narrative
- Consensus as “feeling together”—sociality of affect and sociality of reason
- Consensus as “feeling apart”—consensus as conjuring/banishing the “other”
- Consensus as dissent—heterotopia as a consensus to dissent
- Consensus as anti-dissent—hegemonic construction of the scope of political possibility

The conference is open to any student currently enrolled in a graduate program in English or a related discipline. For consideration, please submit an abstract of no more than 300 words and a short biographical description by **March 6th, 2020**.

Abstracts, as well as questions, should be sent to the conference organizers at **berkeleystanfordconference2020@gmail.com**. Please send your abstract as an email attachment in .doc, .docx, or .pdf format. The file containing the abstract should not include any identifying information. The biographical note should be in the body of the email, and it should include your name and institutional affiliation.