

**Bad Romance: The Ethics of Love, Sex, and Desire**  
Tess McNulty (English) and Becca Rothfeld (Philosophy)

**I. Conference Topic**

In recent months, the #MeToo movement has raised questions of the ethics of love, sex, and desire. Narrowly, it has raised questions about sexual consent and violation; broadly, it has raised questions about attraction, power, monogamy, adultery, sex work, and more. Thinkers and artists throughout history, from Plato and Sappho to Foucault and Martha Nussbaum, have addressed these topics. But in light of the current crisis in sexual ethics, we propose a conference that re-examines how we should conduct ourselves in romantic and sexual relationships.

Issues of erotic ethics not only invite but also demand an interdisciplinary approach. Scholars working in philosophy, history, history of science, literary studies, and art history are all examining different aspects of this topic, such as the moral status of sexual activity, the evolution of erotic norms over time, and the representation of romantic crimes in art and literature. Some of these scholars have engaged one another in the inter-disciplines of women's and gender studies, queer studies, and sex studies. But many have had few occasions to talk to one another: literary scholars working on adultery novels rarely encounter moral philosophers. Moreover, these academics have not yet had a chance to take up the specific concerns that #MeToo has brought to the fore. Indeed, dialogue about the movement has been confined to public forums, where journalists have discussed so-called involuntary celibates' claim to a right to sex and how power differentials in the neo-liberal workplace can vitiate consent.

Our conference would bring scholars in disparate areas together and give them an opportunity to make rigorous contributions to the heretofore informal discourse of #MeToo. Possible panel topics include:

**Consent:** What constitutes consent? Must consent be explicit? In what circumstances is ostensible consent undermined?

**Sexual Rights:** Is there a right to sex or a right to love? Are sex and love commodities, and if so, should they be distributed like other commodities?

**The Ethics of Desire:** We know it's wrong to act badly, but is it possible to *want* badly? Might we have an obligation to modify racist, sexist, or ableist attractions?

**Erotic Representation:** How should sexual violation be depicted in art, literature, pornography, and popular culture? What should we do with artworks, both high and low, created by men and women guilty of sexual transgressions?

**Sex and the Law:** How should sexual crimes be adjudicated? Are unofficial tribunals—for instance the tribunal of public opinion—good forums for adjudication?

**Sexual Technologies:** How have medical and technological advances changed sexual norms or enabled new erotic and romantic crimes? Can sexual violation occur in a virtual sphere?

**Global #MeToos:** How have the questions posed above been addressed in diverse national and cultural settings? How do—and should—their answers change in different contexts?

In asking and answering these questions, we hope to spark conversations about these topics both within Harvard and across academia more generally—and to introduce new nuance into public discussions. To this end, we aim to publish an edited volume of conference papers.

## **II. Logistics: Structure, Keynote Speaker/Faculty Participants, Feasibility**

The conference will last two and a half days, running from Friday evening through Sunday afternoon. On Friday evening, our invited keynote speaker will give a plenary address, followed by a reception. On Saturday and Sunday there will be five to six panels, each comprising three to four graduate students and, in most cases, a faculty respondent. The conference will conclude with a roundtable discussion between panel respondents.

We would like to invite Professor Amia Srinivasan of Oxford as our keynote speaker. Professor Srinivasan's work on the permissibility of political anger has sparked widespread academic discussion, and her recent, viral essay "Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?" introduced questions of the ethics of attraction into the #MeToo discourse. She is now at work on a book, *The Right to Sex*, that is certain to attract a large academic and nonacademic audience. Other potential keynote speakers include Laura Kipnis and Catherine MacInnon. We would also like to invite members of the Harvard community and professors from Boston-area universities to serve as panel respondents. (Perhaps Moira Weigel, Nancy Bauer, and Robert Reid-Pharr.)

We are prepared to coordinate this event. Becca Rothfeld, currently a G3 in the Philosophy department, is at work on a dissertation about sexual and romantic ethics. Her writing about feminism for popular venues has put her into contact with writers at the forefront of contemporary discussions about sexual politics: she was a finalist for both a National Magazine Award for her essay about women and waiting and a National Book Critics reviewing prize for her feminist criticism. Tess McNulty, a G4 in the English department, is writing a dissertation on contemporary fiction and digital culture that focuses substantially on #MeToo discourses. She is also currently teaching a self-designed tutorial on "Feminist Fictions" and writes about women's issues for popular venues. Finally, she is an experienced conference coordinator: as Lead Coordinator of Colloquia in the English department she organizes an annual graduate conference and multiple events with invited faculty speakers.

## **III. Budget**

Keynote speaker travel (international flight and taxis): \$800

Keynote speaker lodging (two nights, Irving House): \$500

Keynote speaker honorarium: \$500

Four student travel Grants: \$800 (\$200 each)

Opening night reception (wine, food): \$280

Dinner with keynote speaker: \$300

Coffee breaks: \$300

Two sponsored lunches: \$900

A/V services: \$550

Poster Printing: \$250

Security/Custodial: \$300

Supplies (nametags, etc.): \$40

Unforeseens: \$100

Coordinator stipends: \$1,000

Total: 6,620