

Tunisian Association for English Language Studies – TAELS

The Poetics and Politics of Identity

Proceedings of the International Conference held in Hammamet
on 24-25 November 2017

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Introduction

The editors

This collection of essays is the result of the contributions of scholars and academics from Tunisia, Algeria, Belgium, Egypt, Germany and Lebanon who have critically engaged a wide array of identity-related issues during the international conference on “The Poetics and Politics of Identity” held on 24-25 November, 2017 in Hammamet, Tunisia.

Recent scholarship in Identity Studies has engaged in a passionate debate that captures the proliferation of the concept among various academic traditions, seeking to formulate a balance between the aesthetic representations of identity and its political potential. In sociology, literature, anthropology, arts, linguistics and other related disciplines, the question of identity represents a core investigation area, lending itself to an impressive array of political and aesthetic approaches. Reflecting on the versatility of identity, different research paradigms have sought to elucidate the intricate links between social experiences, cultural practices, political standpoints and literary forms, taking into account the collapse of geographic and cultural boundaries in a world dominated by unlimited and multiplying connectivity.

Equally integral to the study of identity is language with its different cultural manifestations. From socio-linguistics to discourse studies, language represents an important venue to examine the relationships of power and to reconceptualize identity within one’s social, political, and cultural contexts. In language teaching and learning, identity has proven to be a central concept in the study of teaching-learning styles, educational policies, and teaching methods and approaches.

In the arena of sociopolitical discourses, the overwhelming waves of immigrants and displaced people have

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led to a pressing urgency of rethinking the chasm between the Global North and the Global South. Election discourses – and results – have been influenced by a popular glorification of nationalist voices weary of the potential threat posed by immigrants and asylum seekers. Studies on the discourses of recent election campaigns have been attentive to the politics of ‘race’, ‘class’ and ‘national identity’ in the light of the unprecedented surge of ‘racism’, ‘sexism’, ‘bigotry’, and ‘xenophobia’ and the mass manipulation of people to vote for the advocates of nationalist supremacy and ‘protectionist’ policies.

In culture and literary studies, interest in identity has spurred critical debate among theorists, critics and writers, negotiating the intricate crossovers between the literary and cultural domains, on the one hand, and identity construction, on the other. Novelists, for instance, have been attentive to the representation of identity and have sought to engage creatively in dismantling preset models of racial, ethnic and gender straight-jackets to celebrate constructionist approaches to identity. Diasporic literature, for instance, bears witness to the growing interest in negotiating identity formation, adopting a transcultural vision that refocuses attention from scripting essentialist norms to more fluid dynamic attitudes to identity.

The Poetics and Politics of Identity

The Five Faces of Post-Identity

Chantal Zabus

Université Paris XIII-Sorbonne Paris Cité

It's not the assertion of identity that's important; it's the assertion of non-identity.

Michel Foucault¹

No, an identity is never given, received, or attained; only the indeterminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures.

Jacques Derrida²

Introduction: I-identity

In English, the word “I-identity,” contains the first pronoun “I” which is often contested because it is linked to the emergence of what Dror Wahrman has called the “modern self,” that is, “an essential core of selfhood characterized by psychological depth, or interiority, which is the bedrock of unique, expressive individual identity.”³ Admittedly, he is discussing England in the long eighteenth century, that is, with an eye to the West. If one looks at this Western “I” with a naked eye, one is struck by its anorexic slimness, for it is allegedly the thinnest pronoun in the English language. It is not necessarily used with the same fervor in other languages, as in Chinese. In *The English Class* (2010), Yu

¹ Qtd in D. Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (London: Hutchinson, 1993), p. xv.

² Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthetics of Origins*. Transl. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 28.

³ Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004), p; xi.