

# **In/difference: Ethics, Aesthetics and Politics**

## **Call for Papers**

**Date: March 2-3-4, 2023**

**Organizer: Department of English, Faculty of Letters, Arts and Humanities**

**Manouba University, Tunisia**

**Venue: Faculty of Letters, Arts and Humanities Manouba**

The whole frame of things preaches indifference.

R. W. Emerson

In/difference is a polysemous concept whose definition or signification, if we wish to bind it to a sign system, is vague and loose. The ludic tendency of the concept to slip across borders warrants a multitude of interpretations. While “difference” and “in-difference” rest on a yawning semantic divide, the aim of this conference is to bring them to conceptual compromise, and to constructive dialogue. Far from reductive and exclusive, both concepts find their coherence and, for our purposes, consolation, in a simple, yet significant, slash that both separates and bridges their conjunctive and irreducible disparities.

“In/difference” is characteristically overshadowed by the defining signifier “difference”, a concept that has long connoted ambivalence in human thought. “Difference” has often been (ab)used to legitimate pernicious prejudice, uncouth hate speech, as well as indiscriminate exclusion of the other. It lies at the root of such uncompromising and oft-discriminatory political ideologies as homophobia, anti-Semitism, sexism, racism and linguicism. In its ideational extreme, “difference” is caught up, at its own detriment, in identity-bound conflicting categories, rhetorical assertions, and essentialist forms of selfing and othering.

In philosophy, interest in the term dates back to Plato's endeavour to conceive and forge a “form of the different” in the *Sophist*, and to Aristotle's surmise in *Metaphysics* that “difference” and “otherness” are nothing but worlds on their own. Since then, the term has occupied central stage in philosophical speculation. It has traveled across modern and contemporary critical thought where philosophers, critical theorists, cultural theorists and literary theorists have constantly sought to either celebrate or debunk its meaning as well as its overarching implications. Such thought encompasses, for instance, the essential Finitude of Heideggerean Difference (the theory of “ontological difference”), Derrida's *Différance*, as the site of sanctioned and self-professed semiotic violence, and Deleuze's generative, originary “difference-in-itself.” In learning to anchor “difference”—as a contingent and slippery concept—to philosophical and historical exegesis, we definitely need to learn how to confront the problematic, yet revelatory, question of *alterity* (Reality as Other), an underlying question that the conference will seek to interrogate in earnest.

In Cultural Studies, “In-difference” is more of a Janus-faced truism. It might well mean—depending on context—that “every different other is an in-different other” or that “every different other is an alter-ego.” In theory, the paradox above—which either encourages cultural tolerance or inhibits it—would account for both inter-cultural co-existence and inter-cultural strife. In principle, Cultural Studies privileges difference as a site of tolerance and

recognition, and as an articulation of cultural diversity, minority rights, decolonization and the demise of the Empire. In reality, however, Cultural Studies is plagued by its own interdisciplinary scope and its eclectic humanist reach. Humanist articulations, whether they be in Marxist, feminist, or post-colonialist forms, are Western in character, and, for ostensibly the same reason, are inclined to divide the world along canonical maxims that exclude *different/other* intellectual traditions. Owing to curious intellectual sophistication, the humanist tradition (the subject matter of Cultural Studies) has subverted its emancipatory claims, and has, in turn, spawned what Kobena Mercer calls “the burden of representation”, that is, the burden of “admiring” the exotic Other; the Other who in Homi Bhabha’s words is “almost the same but not quite.”

Modern linguistics too grapples with in/difference. Indeed, the foundation of such linguistic fields as *Pragmatics, Sociolinguistics and Discourse Studies* has been devoted, *inter alia*, to the rehabilitation and validation of the idea/claim that linguistic meanings are not immutable, but they are always changeable, contingent, negotiable and contested. In this conference, we are interested in interrogating the problem of linguistic in/difference not only through the lens of the *vita activa* of attested real-world communicative practice/praxis, but also through the *vita contemplativa* of age-old linguistic theorizing, to use concepts suggested by political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958). How can these fields help us understand language, meaning, identity, and communication in today’s multilingual, multimodal, heteroglossic, super-diverse, but fractured and highly stratified neoliberal societies? What is the message that linguists could impart to a world ravaged by conflict, hate, intolerance, violence, dispossession, populism, democratic collapse, polarization, etc.? How can we reconcile different and conflicting points of view? How can we learn from our difference instead of retreating into solitude, into our “*meaning ghettos*”, to use James Paul Gee’s assertion, (2016: 6)? How can we agree to disagree, to accommodate, change and modify our views? How can we overcome our conflicts, *endoxa*, dogmatism and essentialist ideologies to co-construct meanings and mutual understandings? How can people deliberate, negotiate, compromise, and communicate across different cultural, linguistic and discursive frameworks?

The conference thus seeks to recast the contours of in/difference and to investigate how it may be written into multimodal textualities. We welcome contributions that address the above questions, as well as other questions that relate to or intersect with the conference theme. We are particularly interested in papers that focus on, but are not exclusively limited to, the following:

- Hybridization, sameness and difference
- Writing/ Performing in/difference
- Aesthetic and aestheticized in/difference.
- Politics of in/difference in feminist and Queer theories
- The Anthropocene and in/difference
- (Post)modern in/difference
- Transnationalism, globalization and diversity
- Difference, discrimination and violence
- Difference, inequality and injustice
- Pleasure, desire and in/difference
- Transgressive semiotics
- Learning from and teaching through difference
- TESOL and Global Englishes
- Linguistic difference, testing and assessment

- Second language acquisition and individual differences
- Intercultural rhetoric and discourse
- Global flows, recontextualisation and relocalization
- Intellectuals and in/difference
- The translanguaging movement
- Translation and in/difference
- In/difference and the politics of representation
- In/difference and power relations
- Texts and the negotiation of discursive differences
- In/difference and the Affect
- In/difference, resistance and dissidence

We invite proposals for twenty-minute papers from multidisciplinary perspectives. Abstracts (maximum 250 words), together with a short biography indicating academic background and research interests, should be submitted via e-mail by November, 01 2022.

**E-mail:** [englishdepartment.manouba@gmail.com](mailto:englishdepartment.manouba@gmail.com)

Please include your name, academic affiliation, and contact details. Selected contributors will be notified by January, 01 2023.

Accepted papers after review will be published in a special volume by the Faculty of Letters, Arts and Humanities Manouba in the form of Conference Proceedings.

The conference fee will be € 80 for international participants and 80 TD for Tunisians, payable through Bank transfer. Registration for doctoral students with no institutional affiliation is free.

The registration fees cover for presentations in the conference, conference material, coffee breaks, and lunches.

### **References:**

Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition: A study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bhabha, Homi. (1984). "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October*, Vol. 28: 125-133.

James Paul, Gee (2016). "Discourse analysis matters: bridging frameworks," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 11:4, 343-359.

Mercer, Kobena. (2016). "Ethnicity and Internationality: New British Art and Diaspora-Based Blackness," *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s*. Durham: Duke University Press.