

Beyond Bookish Knowledge

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Too much time has passed for me to recall the context of this scene, but it stands out before me nonetheless. In my first year at The University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, I found myself in the presence of the indomitable Carolyn Cooper, giving an animated reading of Buju Banton's "Untold Stories". The reasoning behind her impromptu analysis of this song escapes me at this moment, but I recall lingering on the lyricist's line, "full up of education yet no own a payroll", and immediately becoming defensive, as though it were an accusation or, worse, a prediction.

It reminded me of questions asked by well-meaning friends and family about how feasible it was to pursue a degree in Literatures in English, especially in times like these when professional degrees seemed to hold more promise. These questions usually did not irritate me. In fact, they emboldened me, for I knew the success and employability of graduates far outweighed the stigma assigned to students in the humanities. But, on that day, after reading the lines of a song I had heard on many occasions before, I briefly had doubts. What wonders reading can do to what we think we know, and how serendipitously it gives us room to reflect on choices we have made, and the language in which we defend them.

It is quite easy and understandable to approach defences of the humanities with scepticism, and label claims to the transformative and transcendent potentials of a degree in literatures in English, philosophy, or history as nothing more than out of touch, lofty and idealistic statements that have no ground on which to stand in today's increasingly mechanised and monetised world. However, the humanities have always had, and continue to have, an impact on how we think about the major problems that face the world, and provides its

students with the necessary skills to have meaningful lives within, and outside of the world of work.

In the age of anthropogenic climate change, which has continued to pose a major threat to the livelihood of Caribbean people, as seen in the heartbreaking scenes in the wake of recent hurricanes, critical study in the various disciplines of the humanities has a role to play in shaping our response. The emergence of the environmental humanities as an area of research signals an interest in an approach to the study of the natural world that goes beyond the materialism of the natural sciences. Moreover, this particular discipline challenges many of the misconceptions of the humanities as limited in its scope. Embracing an interdisciplinary approach that takes into account non-Western cultural conceptualisations of human relationship with land and ecology, the discipline expands our understanding of the challenges facing the world, and offers tangible solutions to these ongoing environmental crises. Understanding the challenges faced by a world becoming increasingly modern, necessitates an awareness of cultural politics that shape human relations; a kind of understanding that is central to training in the humanities.

Further bridging the perceived gap between the humanities and products of modernisation emerging from advancements in science and technology is the 'digital turn' that has taken place in the field, leading to the rise of digital humanities as a site of scholarly interest. In the Faculty of Humanities and Education, at the UWI, these shifts on a global scale aimed at taking into account the changing contexts of our daily lives, have not been ignored.

The movement towards interdisciplinary methods of approaching various texts, whether they be visual, literary, digital, or aural has resulted in exciting additions to course offerings within the faculty, as well as the establishment of a film studies minor, and the expansion of the Bachelors of Liberal Studies degree in the Department of Literatures in English. The latter allows students to take courses in a variety of disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. It is this willingness to consider new texts, and new forms of reading practices that is central to the ethos of the disciplines that make up the humanities, and one that our region and wider global community could benefit from today. Indeed, as the cultural critic Daniel Coleman argues in his book, *In Bed with the Word: Reading, Spirituality, and Cultural Politics*, a sustained

practice of reading and critical thinking is necessary, “if we are to see beyond the cynicism of commodity culture, if we are to engage in the hard work of ... producing citizens instead of consumers”.

The openness and interdisciplinary nature of the studies in the humanities may come as a surprise to some whose conception of the humanities conjures images of students with their head buried in books, detached from the world around them. The humanities was never simply about studying seemingly ancient books (though encountering these texts can be incredibly fulfilling and important in understanding one’s place in the world at this particular moment in history). Rather, the discipline was always more interested in what happens when we think critically, indeed ‘read’ the world around us as it emerges in the form of books, films, languages, philosophies, artefacts, music, dance, orature, and other forms of cultural production. As Coleman notes towards the end of his book, “It does matter what we read but, it matters even more who we become by reading.”

When we take time to consider the world we inhabit, and what has been and continues to be produced by individuals within, and outside of our culture, we are able to go beyond ourselves and our often limited experiences no longer become the only lens through which we encounter the world. It is only when we dare to consider reading as more than holding a book and deciphering symbols on a page, that we will ultimately recognise this practice as having the potential to transform us as individuals, and the communities from which we emerge.