

The Humanities and inter-disciplinary work

I want to start with two forewarnings. I've been asked to speak on the Humanities, and the Humanities is an umbrella term for many subjects, all of them concerned with human beings and human endeavor. As such it is home to several intellectual traditions. Each of these subjects have their own conceptual and methodological histories. So, I don't want to presume here to talk for all subjects that come under the Humanities stream. Rather, I will confine my remarks to what I know best, which is the field of literature and cultural studies. Second, the organizers asked us to respond to five questions which is impossible in a sound bite of eight minutes or so. In this opening round, therefore, I will mainly touch on question one and five because they set the stage. Those questions are, "What are the acceptable methodologies in your field?" and "What are the threats that you face in your field?"

As is common knowledge, the Humanities once accommodated subjects like medicine and astronomy, which have now migrated to the sciences, as well as philosophy, philology, history, literary studies and so on. These subjects were known as the moral sciences although now we are more accustomed to terms such as the Human Sciences or the Liberal Arts as labels for the Humanities (Leezenberg 2018, p. 15). Given their roots in human endeavor, including humanism, the subjects that have remained in the tent are acutely concerned with the political economies of the social and the cultural, and the politics of knowledge production itself. Scholars in English studies, for instance, particularly in a post-colonial context such as Sri Lanka, continuously engage with its contradictions given the discipline's history in colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial regimes. Although there were times this was masked, Literary theory from the very beginning has engaged with the ideological effects of literature, until the dominance of post-structuralism which made the *politics* of literature an object of study.

Methodologically, a watershed in my discipline was the emergence of Cultural Studies within Departments of English in the West from the 1970s onwards which caught on here in the 1990s. It has been argued by Stratton and Ang (2005) that Cultural Studies is "less a specific theoretical and political tradition or discipline than a gravitational field in which a number of intellectual traditions have found a provisional rendez-vous" (p. 360). For these authors Cultural Studies is, therefore, a field that pulls in a number of intellectual traditions, analytical frameworks and methodologies. It follows from this that Cultural Studies is eclectic, which means that it allows one to borrow from a variety of frameworks and disciplines, and because of this, it is also illustrative of how the humanities accommodates several styles of reasoning.

With Cultural Studies there was a very significant shift to include in the

analysis of a single literary text, or author, or group of texts, the conditions of their production and reception as well. In other words, there was a shift away from a deterministic focus on the causalities of biography (for example, how an event in the author's life shapes his/her work) to the socio-political and cultural conditions that produce a text and how it is received. The definition of a text itself changed and moved from the page to what was out there in popular culture. This was particularly so in the work of scholars associated with the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Film, advertising, songs, memes, popular theatre became acceptable texts. Similarly, there was a shift from Drama to Performance Studies which allowed the analysis to expand from plays performed in closed off, elite theatres to observing performances in everyday life such as on the streets, sporting arenas and political platforms (Schechner, 2013). Common question were: What is the relationship between text and context? This called for attention to the historicity of a text, including why certain narratives are more successful and gain traction than others which made us engage with theories of narrativity and narratology. What practices of speech, reading and consumership are maintained, ruptured or dropped altogether at a given point of time and why? Where do we find hybridity and asymmetry? The answers to these questions were then directed at revising the concepts themselves. If definitions tend, in a way, to contain and encircle a concept, our interest was in how a concept can be opened up through these answers/data to broaden its meaning, and thereby to allow for the integration of a concept with others so that finally the unit of knowledge itself expands.

It thereby became possible to work with crosscutting and intersecting concepts from the fields of law, gender, political economy, human geography, etc., in the analysis of literary, film, digital and performance texts. This also granted us different points of access to canonical texts so that they could be prised open from traditional pedagogies, taught afresh and made relevant to contemporary students. The interdisciplinarity of Cultural Studies also enabled the turn to material culture which emerged because of an interest in studying contemporary consumerism, theories such as Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory, and the social life of "things" which was hugely inspirational to us and enabled scholars in the Humanities to analyse objects in relation to their social meaning. I am reminded here of *Mettalic Modern* (2014) by Nira Wickramasinghe which has a chapter on the history of the Singer sewing machine in colonial Ceylon, or *3D things* (2015) by Shermal Wijewardene and Kumudini Samuel which looked at the role of digital and analogue devices and technologies in women's movement work. Or take what has been called 'the spatial turn' (Warf & Arias, 2009) which draws on concepts from human/political geography - a field which has been very influential in my own work and the courses I teach, driving analysis of how, through literature and performance, places, characters and situations are worlded, mapped, routed and ideologically

located (de Mel, in press). Spatial readings of literary texts allow us to ask: How was the modern city or the rural presented in literature as both an imagined and material geography? What does that narrative tell us about how a place, time, and human activity combined to make society and culture fluid and dynamic? In this field of scholarship, ‘eco-criticism’, attentive to how the environment and the anthropocene are narrativized and understood in/through literary texts, has become an important, timely and growing analytical orientation.

All of this is to say that when such gatherings of theoretical frameworks take place, we are already talking about plural intellectual traditions and methodologies.

There are, however, certain points of concern. There has been a critique that Cultural Studies scholars cherry pick from here and there to which the rejoinder has been, if the analysis deepens our understanding of something, why not? But data in the humanities is often messy and ambiguous. For Cultural Studies scholars, this is precisely what is interesting because what is atypical, doesn’t quite fit, is singular and not easily generalizable has always been the place of/for an important critique of institutional power. This emphasis on the singular does not sit very well with the dominance of the positivist research paradigm of today. It is regarded as too individualistic and imaginative to offer validated generalized findings. Related to this is the serious issue of how the number of journals dedicated to Humanities has dwindled. Because of this, it has been easier to get published in Social Science or Area Studies journals, for example, journals that call themselves South Asia Studies for such and such. There is pressure to bring in surveys, questionnaires and qualitative interviews into the research. This has always been part of applied linguistics methodology within the Humanities, but less so in literary studies. We find, today, students adding lists of policy recommendations to their MA theses, a new convention in the Humanities. I’m not denouncing this but drawing attention to the fact that there are different kinds of research conventions and registers of writing in the Humanities with diverse styles of reasoning and presentation which have become less heterogeneous under the compulsions of positivism and applied study. This is a pity. One is always better off when thinking about how our subjects and their styles intersect and interact with each other rather than wanting them to look and sound the same, or be kept locked up in their different spheres.

Neloufer de Mel

Senior Professor and Chair Professor of English, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo

References

- De Mel, Neloufer (in press). The ontologies of morality in Anuk Arudpragasam's A Passage North. In Stefan Horlacher and Thilini Meegaswatta (Eds.). *Contemporary Sri Lankan Literature and Art: Nation Building and the Creation of a New Community*. Routledge.
- Leezenberg, Michiel. (2018). *History and philosophy of the humanities*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Schechner, Richard. (2013). What is performance studies? *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 5(2), 2-11.
- Stratton, J. & Ang, L. (2005). On the impossibility of a global cultural studies: 'British' cultural studies in an 'international' frame. In D. Morley and K. Chen (Eds.). *Stuart hall- critical dialogues in cultural studies* (pp. 360-385). Routledge.
- Warf, Barney & Arias, Santa. (2009). *The spatial turn: Interdisciplinary perspectives*. Routledge.
- Wickramasinghe, N. (2014). *Mettalic Modern: Everyday Machines in Colonial Sri Lanka*. Berghan.
- Wijewardene, Shermal & Samuel, Kumuduni. (2015). *3D things: Devices, technologies, and women's organising in Sri Lanka*. Suriya Women's Development Center and the International Center for Ethnic Studies.