



CIPRIANI COLLEGE
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES



WORK MATTERS

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Emancipation Daze

Recently I read an article in one of the papers that left me disappointed and somewhat ashamed. The article detailed local response to the existence of a book with LGBTQI+ content, with predictable uproar amongst the usual suspects engaged in the battle to protect the T&T collective morality. Alphabetic identity is a very difficult topic for many. I have some understanding of this, coming from a decidedly rural, working class, Christian background. My early musical preference (there being no real alternative) was classic Bujuta Dancehall. And, with an all-boys, Catholic secondary background, alternative gender identification was never particularly high on the “permissible” or “possible” scale. But still the reflexive and rabid moral correction targeting LGBTQ persons just strikes as all manner of wrong

I won't try to offer a religious argument. The authorities I would appeal to such as Clyde Harvey, Thomas Merton, Tolkien, and Stan Lee, probably wouldn't be very convincing. I will however offer some primary school (also Roman Catholic) history to suggest that working people, labour, cannot rightly discriminate against the LGBTQI+ community.

Most of us here today made the ancestral journey in the form of forced labour. African Slaves and indentured servants from Europe, China and India all joined the first peoples, press ganged into colonial service. We died on the sea, in the fields, in industry, in barracks and shanties, from poverty, neglect and lack of opportunity. We who laboured in the region found conditions of work that were inhumane by design and administration. Death was the immanent and ever-present outcome of the conditions of labour, precisely because we who worked were perceived as inhuman.

Our approximate humanity was established by a new science of race, reserving divinity and fullness of being to whites, while calculating the evolutionary distance of all others from that ideal. It was logical, therefore, that we could not belong, be citizens, have rights, or expect to be treated better than animals either in law

or culture. It was perceived that ‘the inhuman other’ could and should be excluded. Further, as a culture, we have perfected the art of exclusion on the basis of race, class, gender, colour and everything in-between. We've even figured out how to create ‘invisible’ lines of exclusions conveniently, in response to a new societal tactical challenge. Groups were wholesale grandfathered across lines, with the implicit understanding that those lines can, and will be situationally re-enforced. Cultural maturity and progress though, has seen whole races be granted humanity. Of course, in times of extreme social distress, such as criminal activity, some still have the power to discern the continued existence of non-human monsters and cockroaches.

It appears to many that we are in such a period of social distress, requiring the discernment of lines of demarcation. And those lines coincide unfortunately, with the Ls, Gs, Bs and all others suffering from gender perception impairment. My problem is with determining who is qualified to take up the job of discernment.

Can a black man, whose humanity was previously defined by fraction or blood droplets, who was denied even the right to die, shoulder to shoulder with white brethren, for king and country, and who remains an endangered species in many places, discern that line? Can a woman of any race, creed or colour, who has historically been denied all manner of equality, and is joined even now in continuing global battles against violence and for bodily autonomy, draw that line? Can anyone who has been discriminated against draw that line that makes discrimination permissible, and, more importantly, should they?

As a black, working class, Caribbean man, born of slavery and colonialism; all of my experiences of difference and discrimination, otherness and othering, have taught me one thing; the act of discrimination is part of the cynical practice of power which delivers material and spiritual harm, including to those who enforce lines of demarcation without knowing on which side of the line they stand.. At this time of year, I am forced to reflect

on how we continue to deny humanity, especially to the vulnerable, excluded and isolated. Is that not in a way the very definition of being black? And when I participate, does the emancipation that I celebrate apply, therefore, only to me? Does my religion, the ironic result of my enslavement and once used to justify my otherness, require me to deny the right of being to others? In all this am I incessantly blind to the practices of power and the grand design of the enriching 1% of the entire world?

As I emancipate myself from the mental traps and generational injustices of slavery, must I not take others with me? We who labour, who have known struggle, who intrepidly traverse vulnerability, simply cannot visit it onto others. That is obscene.

Difference is often frightening and there are many things about many people I will never understand. But perhaps I don't have to understand you to love you, to make space for you and let you be you. My history of being and what little I understand of my ironically acquired religion actually demands that I do.

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