

## **The role of the Humanities in shaping the Social Sciences**

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‘The Humanities are not a luxury’ – Martha Nell Smith

Audre Lorde’s powerful words in 1984 are significant in how the humanities needs to be placed:

“Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives” (Audre Lorde, 1984: 38).

‘Poetry’ in this context includes music, history, art, philosophy, dance, theatre—all the arts and humanities. Imagination is significant in this regard: the importance of creating; reconstructing; and re-making cannot be underestimated.

### *Social sciences and humanities and social change*

The HSRC is taking the humanities seriously in our research, encouraging the use of creative methodologies in African knowledge production.

The significance of narrative and Story, not as ‘soft science’, or worse, not science at all, but as having a value in itself. The question of the humanities is really also a question of what kind of knowledge is valued; how narratives are understood in the traditional academic sense as not ‘real accounts’ of the ‘truth’. The question of the humanities, the apparent ‘crisis’ is fundamentally about who defines the scope of what constitutes ‘truth’ and ‘fact’, who creates and disseminates knowledge.

The question is not whether the story has factual value or not, but the value such a story has for the characters, the persons, who live a life, and how this helps us think through difficulties such as poverty, culture, masculinity, colonialism.

It is important to value story and narrative (rooted in indigenous knowledge systems) because it allows space for diverse voices, voices often silenced by imperialism and systems that credit only certain kinds of knowledgeable voices.

Through Thando's book, we are able to explore a controversial issue, one that links ideas of culture to ideas of masculinity, and how this works in the world we live in. As the humanities has done in the past, and continues to do, the novel asks hard questions about the 'human' – what it means to be a man, a black man, what culture is, and how flexible/inflexible understandings of culture are. The job of the humanities are precisely to ask these hard questions, and not always through a Foucauldian analysis (however useful), which most people have never heard of. In other words, how do we take the big intellectual questions and make them meaningful and paramount to people outside of research councils and academic institutions? One way is through novels such as Thando's, through poetry, through music. However unpalatable (for some) the questions Thando raises in his book, they are questions asked at a level that allows more people into the world of the novel, and through his characterization and context, the world of the real. They are by no means simplistic questions - in fact they interrogate complex and very real concerns about culture, masculinity, African-ness, about the penis. It is precisely through the novel that we (and specifically Thando in this instance) can creatively interrogate these issues.

Q: What do the humanities mean within a post-colonial state like South Africa, where there is a push to skill people in the Maths and Sciences so that we can compete on a global level? How do we prioritise narrative and story in our country and on our continent so that we begin articulating theories of our own?