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Towards a 'Development Humanities': widening the multi-disciplinary field of development studies

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ABSTRACT
This paper proposes a new sub-field of Development Humanities (DH) that aims to extend the multidisciplinary base of Development Studies (DS) via a distinctive set of themes, analytical tools and data sources. This would contribute further to 'epistemological pluralism', while equipping DS with additional tools to engage with today's urgent and complex issues. These include subjective aspects of how 'development' is experienced, imagining better development futures, and finding new ways to communicate ideas. Aiming for 'radical interdisciplinarity', DH would seek to critically challenge mainstream ideas and encourage the co-production of new research questions, as well as building new pedagogies and equipping practitioners with useful skills. Comparable fields such as Environmental Humanities and Medical Humanities offer potentially useful lessons, as well as highlighting possible risks.

Introduction

Analysing development requires the study of many things. On one level, it is primarily concerned with understanding the economic and political conditions under which the countries of the former 'third world' can raise their economic productivity, tackle problems of poverty, better utilise foreign aid, and improve living standards for their citizens – but on another, its subject matter is far more diverse than this. For example, it also requires us to understand the history of ideas about what 'development' means, recognise that people in different societies understand development differently, analyse how histories of colonialism have shaped unequally the developmental opportunities that are available, and most importantly perhaps, document how people across different societies *experience* and try to influence – or resist – forms of development that are all too often imposed upon them. Bearing in mind the wide-ranging scope of development as subject, and the continuing relevance today of ideas about development, this paper makes the case for establishing a new sub-field of Development Humanities (DH) within Development Studies (DS). Specifically, it argues that DS would benefit by extending the scope of its multidisciplinarity towards 'the humanities'.

The field of humanities is broadly concerned with what it means to be human, and with academic disciplines such as history, literature, fine arts, languages, law and philosophy.[1] There are both intrinsic and instrumental arguments made in favour of their value. The arts and humanities are important in any society because they help people engage with issues of cultural difference and social change (Worton, 2008) and are central to international collaboration and the building of 'knowledge economies' (Beall, 2014). They are seen as fostering critical thinking that can

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generate alternative ideas and perspectives, and the kinds of creativity increasingly seen as central to problem solving within today's complex, rapidly changing societies (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016).

At the core of the proposed DH would be a 'humanistic' approach to development that engages with source materials such as novels, films, poetry, art and music that are not normally included as part of mainstream DS. It would also draw from distinctive modes of analysis and 'meaning-making practices' common in humanities disciplines, such as textual interpretation, narrative analysis and critical deliberation. This can extend the scope of DS by adding greater understanding of (a) individual human experiences within so-called 'development encounters', and (b) the contingencies of context and history within which such experiences are located. In this way DH would give prominence to less frequently addressed themes such as imagination, emotion, ethics, morality, and aesthetics – as well as extending the range and scope of interpretative perspectives, theories and methods that are used within DS. The hope is that DH would not only *complement* existing DS research but would also *challenge* existing assumptions to help co-produce new ideas, approaches and practice. In sum, the aim of the paper is to set out the possible dimensions of a radically interdisciplinary sub-field that would add value to existing modes of DS research and teaching. At a time of recurrent and interconnected global geopolitical, environmental and economic crises we should certainly not be afraid of exploring new ways of thinking.

Rationale: the idea of development humanities

There will be some development scholars who, as social scientists, may baulk at the idea of building closer links with the humanities, where not only the subject matter differs but also the epistemological assumptions and approaches that are deployed (see Figure 1). While there are established areas of qualitative social science, much social science increasingly relies on 'scientific' ways of knowing based on a positivist epistemology, based on reproducible results or mathematical proof, while the humanities seek to understand human experience more through an interpretative lens using tools of creativity, critical understanding, perspective and insight (Cole, 2015). There are legitimate questions as to how far productive conversations are possible across the divide.

Obviously, no single discipline can possibly have all the answers. There has long been recognition of the need to move out of disciplinary 'silos' and for different specialists to work together in the face of complex, multi-dimensional global problems, in what Pedersen (2016) has called the 'interdisciplinary turn'.[2] For example, researchers in natural sciences and engineering have

	Towards the humanities	Towards the positivistic (social) sciences
Foci	Unique and idiographic Human centred The inner: subjective, meaning, feeling	General and homothetic Structure centred The outer: objective, 'things', events
Epistemology	Phenomenalist Relativist	Absolutist Realist
Task	Interpret, understand Describe, observe	Causal explanation Measure
Style	Imaginative Validity	Systematic Replicability
Theory	Inductive, grounded 'Story telling'	Deductive, abstract 'Operationalism'
Values	Ethically and politically committed Egalitarianism	Ethically and politically neutral Expertise and elites

Figure 1. A bridgeable divide? Source: adapted from Plummer (1983). Note: there is a middle ground between these binaries, in which there are a range of non-positivistic social science disciplines and approaches, many of which lean further towards the humanities.

successfully collaborated in developing the field of nanotechnology, while environmental science has progressed by linking various different branches of the natural sciences and combining these with insights from economics. As Frodeman (2010), p. xxix) suggests, a call for interdisciplinarity is about 'making knowledge more relevant, balancing incommensurable claims and perspectives, and raising questions concerning the nature and viability of expertise'.[3]

The first task in building a field of DH is to consider the relatively small amount of already existing DS work that may be relevant, which offers a partial starting point. Examples of work that engages with DH themes includes Mishra (2025) on the potential of poetry to contribute to debates around 'decolonisation' within DS, Cameron et al. (2022) on music and emotion in NGO fundraising, Clammer's (2014) discussion of development and participatory arts, Roe's (1994) adaptation of literary narrative theory to analyse difficult policy problems, Sutoris (2016) on ideas about development portrayed in documentaries produced by the Films Division of India during 1948–75, and Lewis et al. (2013, 2022) work on understanding 'popular representations of development' provided by contemporary novels, film, music and other media. To this we can also add existing scholarship from the humanities that engages explicitly or implicitly with themes of development. One obvious example is found in the writings of Edward Said, particularly *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), both of which regularly find their ways onto university level development studies reading lists.

Secondly, we can draw inspiration from recent efforts that can be seen as adjacent to, or comparable with, development studies – such the new(ish) synthetic fields of Environmental Humanities (EH) and the Medical Humanities (MH).[4] Both of these can offer useful ideas and suggest possible directions. For example, one of the rationales for the MH is to challenge the pressures towards commercialization and dehumanization of the health sector (Cole, 2015). This resonates with the ways that contemporary development discourses increasingly favour the private sector as development actor and sideline the importance of people and communities in favour of technological fixes. For EH, a key impulse is similarly that of challenging the dominance of mainstream natural science and market economics narratives about environmental problems with more human and nature-centred ones. This is another position familiar to many in DS, where there has been a struggle over many decades to integrate local participatory voices and ideas.

In the sections that follow, we first briefly discuss questions of disciplinarity in DS, before moving on to discuss potential value in building the DH field ('the why'), followed by some brief illustrative examples that are intended to show how building a closer link between DS and the humanities might work ('the how').

Before moving on, three disclaimers are needed. First, the paper aims to indicate the potential of an idea, focusing on only a small number of the many theoretical directions and themes that are possible, using very selective examples. Second, it does not engage with the full range of the humanities,[5] which would be difficult to do in a short paper, restricting the discussion mainly to creative literature and brief references to the arts. Finally, the paper is part of the author's own ongoing journey into less familiar areas and ways of seeing. Its scope is therefore necessarily limited by the author's own training in anthropology and development studies, rather than in a field of humanities scholarship. The ideas here are offered in a spirit of humility and respect for those far better versed in the humanities.

Development studies and its disciplines

DS first emerged as a field of research and teaching in higher education in the years following the Second World War during the early period of decolonisation, with the new sub-discipline of 'development economics' at its core.[6] The broad aim of this early DS was to understand the conditions under which the newly-independent countries could follow the path of the industrialised Western countries to achieve more productive economies and improved wellbeing for their citizens. It has generally been concerned with two main different but interrelated ways of thinking about

development – development as the consequences of wider processes of unfolding change in a society, and development in the sense of deliberate interventions intended to bring about positive outcomes.

Today DS is a diverse academic field concerned with the multiple dimensions of development and change, having expanded its scope from the early focus on economic growth, industrialization and poverty to include themes such as governance and institutions, climate and environment, human capabilities and wellbeing, gender, social and public policy, civil society, migration and conflict. It has become inclusive and dynamic and thrives on contestation and debate. There are many competing views about how development ideas and practices should be understood, about the optimal mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, and about the balance between theoretical and 'applied' perspectives. Different iterations of DS have emerged in various universities and research institutes around the world, including 'classical', 'critical' and 'global' variants (Sumner, 2024). Problems of development have come to be viewed from different positions and perspectives – including as a national level priority, as a set of shared interdependent global challenges, and as a project concerned with helping distant others (Currie-Alder, 2016).

DS has therefore continued to evolve, synthesise and explore new ideas: 'Rather than a neat succession of intellectual traditions, development studies – and the practice it inspired – elaborated, borrowed and accumulated an array of ideas, concepts and theories' (Currie-Alder, 2016, p. 9). It is an explicitly multidisciplinary field embracing a range of different perspectives – including those from sociology, anthropology, economics, geography and political science (Sumner, 2024). As is the case within some other areas of social sciences such as sociology, two different and sometimes opposing trends have become apparent within DS – one towards positivism and an associated set of mathematical models and quasi-experimental studies and the other a critical social science tradition that focuses on power, agency, history and the structural causes of inequality and underdevelopment (Currie-Alder, 2016). According to Hart and Padayachee (2010, p. 59) the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s placed neoclassical economics at the centre of DS and weakened its 'interdisciplinary ethos', and a tendency remains for it to 'crowd out' other perspectives.

While multidisciplinarity has long been accepted as a key principle in DS, it has not necessarily always been adopted or practiced successfully (Harriss, 2013).[7] As a result, there are still frequent calls for development scholars to break out of the 'disciplinary silos' that confine them, as well as differing views about the appropriate balance to be had between disciplines (Currie-Alder, 2016). A key factor motivating my argument in this article is that multidisciplinarity in DS has mainly been centred on the need to integrate different areas of the *social sciences*,[8] rather than engaging with more 'distant' disciplines like the humanities and arts.[9]

As already mentioned, one way forward is to draw insights and lessons from new synthetic interdisciplinary fields such as EH and MH. These aim to construct stronger links between 'scientific' approaches and 'humanistic' questions around experiences, values, moral responsibilities, ethics and human creativity, and to improve 'trans-disciplinarity' by addressing practical problems. Key themes in MH include exploring ethics and culture, emotional dimensions of health and wellbeing, the role of artistic and literary representation, as well as improving relationships between patients and professionals and restoring public trust in health systems (Cole, 2015). EH seeks to challenge the idea that natural scientists are the only legitimate voices of the nonhuman world, and to suggest stories, strategies and metaphors that can help people rethink relationships with nature (Castree, 2024).[10] It also seeks mediate between natural sciences and 'the public' by challenging the marginalization of other voices as 'non science' (Bird Rose et al., 2012, p. 1).

What does the development humanities bring?

The role of knowledge and learning in society, and the relevance of the humanities in particular, has long been controversial. The British scientist, novelist and civil servant C.P. Snow famously initiated a public debate during the 1950s about the problem of the 'two cultures' of the sciences on the one hand, and the humanities on the other. Though Snow was at home in both, he felt neither understood the other very well, and that this was a fundamental problem for society. He also suggested that the humanities at this time dominated the worldviews of key policy elites in ways that restricted proper engagement with developments in science, engineering and technology, to the detriment of social progress. Snow's polemic certainly stimulated useful debate but at its heart, according to Kagan (2009), was a 'brash dismissal of the humanities as an intellectual mission lacking in rigour and unable to contribute to the welfare of those living in economically under-developed regions' (p. 1).

US sociologist Lewis C. Coser identified an analogous position among some social scientists during the 1960s and 1970s – where it was sometimes felt that it was 'beneath their dignity' for sociologists to show an interest in studying novels. This prompted Coser's *Sociology and Literature* reader (1972), which aimed to challenge this view by providing extracts from classic novels alongside discussions of the ways they illuminated key sociological themes such as power and authority, bureaucracy and the family. Citing Henry James in the introduction to his volume, Coser argued that 'there is no impression of life, no manner of seeing it and feeling it, to which the plan of the novelist may not offer a place' (Coser, 1972 [1963], p. xv).

Nevertheless, C.P. Snow's perception of the humanities lack of relevance arguably came to dominate many Western countries, and the arts and humanities have lost ground. Today we find a dominant utilitarian policy discourse that prioritises 'Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics' (STEM) subjects over most other fields, where they command the bulk of the resources available for teaching and research.[11]

A key part of the case for a DH is its potential to both extend and challenge DS in several key areas, including offering perspectives on power, the complexities of knowledge production, and the imagining of development futures. In the following sections, we further develop the case for building the DH in terms of its potential contribution to ongoing wider debates around epistemic pluralism, decolonising knowledge, attending to the importance of narrative, and building practical skills.

Epistemic pluralism

Building further on Snow's 'two cultures' distinction, Kagan (2009) developed a framework of 'the three cultures' in which he contrasts natural sciences, social sciences and humanities. Each contains different yet potentially complementary assumptions and research practices. He makes the case for greater mutual understanding and for the desirability of an 'epistemic pluralism', suggesting that society would benefit from achieving a more balance between the humanities, natural sciences and humanities. He also identifies the considerable ideological pressures and preferences that work against this. At any given time, such a balance is lacking, with a tendency for certain disciplines or methods to gain disproportionate power, as in the case of the current policy emphasis on STEM. As a result, he argues, 'every society needs a cohort of intellectuals to check the dominance of a single perspective when its ideological hand becomes too heavy' (p. 265–6). In this sense our case for building a DH can be seen to have a counter-cultural aspect.

Similarly, within social sciences themselves, there have been tendencies for quantitative approaches to gain dominance, both within academia and then reflected more widely within discourses of so-called 'evidence-based policy making'. In development policy, there has been a shift towards prioritising measurement or impact focused tools like randomised control trials (RCTs) at the expense of qualitative approaches that engage with context, subjectivity and

complexity (and sometimes at the expense of other quantitative approaches too). For example, the use of RCTs in analysing gender and development interventions has led to a situation in which 'the marginalization of theory has gone hand in hand with the marginalization of other forms of knowledge' (Kabeer, 2020). The prominence of RCTs, driven by ideological and resourcing pressures, may have gone beyond their undoubted usefulness in providing answers to certain questions in specific contexts.

To achieve greater balance, Kagan suggests, different epistemic cultures will need to learn more about each other and try to understand each other better. The first step is to recognise that each of the three cultures rests on a different set of premises guiding research questions, different analytical tools for gathering evidence, and different concepts used to develop and support explanations. Where these are used in complementary ways, it may be possible achieve more depth and the breadth to both better understand the human and natural worlds, and perhaps to more successfully get to grips with complex global problems.

The importance of narrative

In recent years, the concept of the narrative has become popular again, perhaps in part as a response to the wider trend towards quantification. For example, there has been interest among some economists in using narrative ideas from the humanities to enrich mainstream economics, which they argue has lost sight of certain key humanist values. Morson and Schapiro (2017) suggest that 'the humanities could supplement economics: with stories, a better understanding of the role of culture, and a healthy respect for ethics in all its complexity' (p. 13). The empathy, judgment and wisdom found in fiction narratives can help economists build better models: 'to understand people one must tell stories about them. There is no way to grasp most of what individuals and groups do by deductive logic' (p. 9). In a similar vein, *Narrative Economics* by Schiller (2019) explores how narratives need to be built into explanations about how the economy works, such as the fact that 'stories' about booms or panics help to shape real world economic events.[12]

While DS is generally comfortable with both theoretically and empirically informed explanations, it has arguably been less able to imagine, generate and sustain visions of development that might inform or enable new thinking. The capacity to build alternative narratives that recognise the full range of issues and experiences that matter has been elusive. Peter Sutoris and Uma Pradhan's book *Reimagining Development* (2025) confronts this problem head-on, drawing among other things on a discussion of narrative theory, poetry and satire. Another example of imaginative reframing is needed is Raworth's (2017) *Doughnut Economics*, which places environmental limits at its core in the effort to reimagine a new narrative of economics for a shared future.

Stories, then are important – but they tend to come in different forms and are not without their pitfalls. In a widely viewed 2009 TED talk, novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie points out that 'there is never a single story about any place' and discusses the biases, stereotypes, and incompleteness inherent in narratives. In a similar vein, political sociologist Tilly (2002) in his essay 'The trouble with stories', identifies the problem of the 'standard story' which though convenient, tends towards oversimplification. While standard stories serve an essential purpose in helping us navigate through everyday life, they may not provide accurate accounts of complexity, causality and context. The task of the social scientist, Tilly says, must therefore be to 'dig between' and 'tunnel under' these standard stories to construct 'superior, contextualized' stories.

Decolonising knowledge

Development studies, along with the concept of development itself, have always been vulnerable to critiques in the basis of its colonial roots and its positioning within a system of power located primarily in the West. The call to 'decolonise' knowledge is therefore particularly acute in DS (Taylor et al., 2024).[13]

Postcolonial theory within the humanities offers DS distinctive and potentially complementary insights into these issues. Said's (1978) foundational work on 'orientalism' is a cornerstone of postcolonial theory, providing a lens through which we can better understand continuing processes of (under)development in countries that were formerly colonies. Said not only shows how colonialism was enabled through the construction of an orientalist 'other', but he also sets out new analytical tools, including the 'contrapuntal' and 'heterophonic' reading of literary texts, that offer new insights into ways that power works through them. About the colonial novels of Rudyard Kipling and others, for example, Said (1993, p. 195) writes:

> To read these major works of the imperial period retrospectively and heterophonically with other histories and traditions counterpointed against them, read them in the light of decolonization, is neither to slight their great aesthetic force nor to treat them reductively as imperialist propaganda. Still, it is a much graver mistake to read them stripped of their affiliations with the facts of power which informed and enabled them.

In explaining how Western literature and art was inexorably linked to colonialism, Said's insights make possible analysis of its impact in new ways – not only as a system of rule, but also as an all-encompassing 'way of seeing' that positioned the West as superior to East. Within this perspective, questions of development are moved from the exclusively economic and political realms to reveal their cultural dimensions. At the same time, Said's work also showed that Western narratives, initially used as tools of domination, could also become part of narratives of resistance that were used to challenge and ultimately throw off colonial rule.

The comparative study of literature is also valuable to DS because it may challenge dominant Western development narratives, with fiction offering new routes into indigenous and local knowledge systems. For example, Mohanty's (2011) analysis of Senapati's late nineteenth century Indian novel *Six Acres and a Third* shows how the novel makes visible an anti-colonial, non-Western modernity based on the 'rationality' of certain traditional Indian social institutions, thereby challenging conventional notions such as Jameson's (2002) influential idea that there is a 'singular modernity'. He characterises the value of such an approach to comparative literature as 'a project of historical retrieval and imaginative philosophical reconstruction' (p. 3). Work of this kind also suggests that there is already work in the humanities that can be more fully embraced by DS, and which lends itself to an emerging DH.

Perspectives from post-colonial theory can also challenge social sciences in radical ways. For example, Spivak's (2003) concept of the humanities as a field that embraces a concept of 'singular unverifiability' – in the sense that there is no one correct reading of any text, and no essentialized 'other' – makes possible a special kind of inclusivity and openness, along with a recognition of 'subaltern' voices not available through more positivist epistemologies.[14] This approach to comparative literature, rather than closing off possibilities, helps to create 'an explosive and affirmative politics of the incalculable' (Walker, 2023, p. 258).

Building practical skills

Finally, there are those who argue that a deeper engagement with the humanities can both contribute to citizenship and provide useful professional skills. A key purpose of education is to teach students how to think critically so that they can become more knowledgeable and empathetic citizens. For example, Nussbaum (2010) sees the humanities as balancing prevailing tendencies towards economism, since alongside training students to think critically, it also helps to transcend local loyalties and imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person.

Following from this, there is also evidence that studying the humanities might also help to produce more effective development practitioners. A British Council (2014) study concluded that arts and humanities can strengthen critical thinking along with building skills needed for addressing complexity and tolerating ambiguity. It noted also that the study of languages is important for improving local knowledge and that religious studies could be valuable in providing people with

'knowledge necessary to understand conflicts and develop effective partnerships in locations where religion plays a central role in society'.

There are useful parallels here with insights from the MH, where improving relations between professionals and patients is seen as a key aim. In the context of development professionals, activists or volunteers, a DH could be useful in helping to rethink relationships at community level or within organizations.

Landscaping development humanities: insights and approaches

In the preceding section, we considered justifications for DH in relation to building epistemic pluralism, foregrounding the importance of narratives, furthering decolonisation debates, and building transferable skills. In this section, we briefly review some of the ways that the proposed sub-field of DH can generate new insights and ideas. It draws on selected examples from both DS and the humanities to give a clearer sense of what a DH could look like in terms of its potential to build theory, explore less familiar themes, engage the imagination in new ways and create new pedagogies as part of DS undergraduate or postgraduate teaching.

First, DH can contribute to building new theory, particularly around power and representation. For example, Marino (2015) analyzes the short stories of Indian writer and activist Mahasweta Devi as 'acts of angry writing'. One short story analysed in depth is *Shishu* (translated as Little Ones), recounting an encounter between local community members and government administrative officer charged with assessing the need for famine relief. The story is set among the Agariya 'tribal' indigenous community, forced by poverty to seek refuge in forest areas and often surviving only through theft. Drawing on Said, Marino's close narrative analysis of the text leads her to devise the concept of 'legal orientalism'. Despite the formal repeal of the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act after Indian Independence, Devi's work illustrates how communities such as the Agariyas remain marginalized. Marino's analysis of the text identifies assumptions hidden in cultural sources of law that show how these laws have 'disempowered colonial subjects, depriving them of their political subjectivity' (p. 206).[15]

Second, a humanities approach widens the range of sources considered relevant to gaining an understanding of contemporary events. For example, Roy's (1999) concept of 'de-development'[16] arose in the context of Israel's economic and political relationship with the Palestinians within its borders as well as those in the Occupied Territories. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's poems have, since the 1960s, expressed and revealed aspects of this lived reality, including giving form and shape to people whose development future has been taken from them. This poetry expands our understanding of what de-development looks and feels like in terms of lived experience. For example, 'Identity Card' (1964) describes the experience of being interrogated by an Israeli official, while it simultaneously expresses resistance by omitting from the poem the official's questions, so that it consists only of the person's replies in Arabic. Similarly, the poetics of rights, justice and history are explored in relation to 'A Ready Scenario' (2008) in arguing for the need to identify a new beginning, based on revisiting and reimagining the past (Ghanim, 2011). Today Darwish's poetry continues to inform Palestinian resistance to occupation, regularly quoted in graffiti circulating in the context of the conflict (see *Al Jazeera*, 13 March 2024). In these ways, an approach informed by the humanities also potentially widens our understanding of agency, as well as the range of possible ways to communicate ideas.

Third, the humanities can add further to DS efforts to engage with 'affect', i.e. people's subjective experiences of emotion or feeling in their response to development interventions and activities. For example, Cameron et al. (2022) work on the analysis of sound – and not just images, video and text – seeks to explain how audiences respond to development messaging. The work shows how music is used shape emotional responses to NGO fund raising appeals, and that it reinforces unhelpful stereotypes around Southern character and need on the one hand, and Northern agency and power on the other.

In another example, paying more attention to how people feel about the past is increasingly seen as having implications for development practice, since a lack of resolution of the past can perpetuate the fragility of developmental gains in post-conflict states. There is growing interest in and experience with using community arts to promote reconciliation in countries such as Columbia and Kosovo, where there is an attempt to confront the material consequences of past violence. For example, the 'Changing the story' project has worked with community arts groups, activists and museums to promote social reconciliation in the aftermath of conflict (Cooke & Soria-Donlan, 2020).

Fourth, the humanities bring a focus on 'engaging the imagination' in ways that social sciences have avoided or found difficult. The human imagination is where ideas are tried out, alternatives explored and longings expressed, as Clammer (2014, p. 150) argues: 'The imaginary looms large in the construction of any human entity – nation, society, tribe, religion, commune, regiment, club – but in much social analysis the actual nature and scope of this imagination is not explored, but somehow just assumed'. Arguably, not enough of this kind of work has been undertaken within DS. However, it *has* become a theme within EH. For example, Schneider-Mayerson's (2018) research on how people read climate fiction is both theoretically and methodologically innovative in the way it seeks to understand how creative writing may engage a reader's imagination. It aims to build an interdisciplinary and empirically grounded 'empirical ecocriticism' approach to environmental narrative, influenced by 'reader-response theory', based on understanding how a text's meaning is constructed (or co-constructed) by its readers. The study explores the extent to which certain texts 'succeeded' in enabling people to 'imagine climate futures' and persuade them of the urgency for change.

Fifth, and related to some of these earlier points, a DH would help challenge a commonly assumed binary in relation to 'sciences versus arts' debates – that we need either 'fact' or 'emotion' to understand the world. As Hoydis et al. (2023) comment in the context of climate crisis, 'science' is just one available frame through which to try to understand things but has become dominant. Instead, we need 'a heterogenous discursive field' through which the future can be imagined in multiple ways. The challenge is therefore to build 'climate literacy': a multidimensional understanding of both scientific fact and critical reflection as well as individual forms of agency and behaviour. In the same way, it is tempting to suggest that we need to explore the cognitive, affective and pedagogic potential a similar kind of 'development literacy'.

Finally, a DH might allow us to build new pedagogies. John Harriss (2014) has experimented with the use of novels in teaching alongside more conventional academic texts and reports, to complement insights from academic work with those from creative writing. For example, students were asked to read Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* alongside Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* alongside Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* alongside Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. Student feedback supported the idea that using non-social science literary sources had pedagogical value in 'bring[ing] these problems alive', 'appreciat[ing] the human significance of the arguments of the social scientists' and helping students 'to understand and empathise with the experience of others'. Harriss concluded that:

> The portrayals of the social impact of early industrialism, of colonialism, of ethnic conflict, and of the impact of war on the lives of the characters in the three novels discussed here do indeed extend readers' moral sensibilities, and in doing so, bring greater meaning to the study of social science. (2014, p. 50)

Perhaps one of the roles that fiction can play is to enhance, making facts more real

Schwittay's (2023) approach to building creative pedagogy by teaching 'critical hope' might also inform DH. This is a framework intended to challenge what she argues is the narrowing space for 'transformative pedagogies' within neoliberal academia. It would aim to develop new ways of teaching that encourages students to imagine new responses to global challenges, including using the arts alongside social sciences, drawing on design methods and on theories of 'critical praxis'.

Conclusion

Centred on human ways of being in the world, insights from the arts and humanities are important for the study of development. Recognising that complex global problems are best approached holistically, DH would pay attention to the moral and ethical dimensions of uncertainty and change, and to the need to engage critically with the dehumanizing effects of reductivism, commercialization and resurgent techno-optimism. In view of these priorities and drawing on comparable experiences in the environmental and medical fields, the time now feels right to explore new forms of engagement between DS and the humanities.

In many societies, the humanities are under threat as their perceived value has declined and their relevance questioned. Furthermore, the case for DH also responds to calls from within DS to evolve and adapt to stay relevant – by forging new links between different approaches and disciplines and connecting diverse insights and ideas: 'Rather than emphasising a unique identity, development studies needs to draw in complementary knowledge and reinvigorate its scholarly organisation in order to build such bridges' (Currie-Alder, 2016, p. 20). While there have been frequent calls to integrate DS with fields such as engineering, natural sciences, business schools and medicine, these have rarely included the humanities, and so we suggest also travelling further afield.

DH has the potential to contribute to a 'thicker' understanding of social and economic change that both complements and challenges 'reductionist' accounts of people as rational, decision-making subjects. Humanist research is important because it questions a status quo in which 'facts, generalizations and abstractions have become divorced from the imaginative, inspirational and the idiographic' (Plummer, 1983). In this way the DH can be understood as part of wider efforts to redress imbalances between the 'three cultures' described by Kagan (2009) in an age in which positivist research has become over-dominant. It offers DS insights that can contribute to ongoing debates around decolonisation and transdisciplinarity, promising what Cole (2015) call 'a bridge between science and experience' – in this case providing opportunities to study literary representations of development alongside scientific theories, models and documents.

However, there are also some risks associated with establishing a DH sub-field. First, and as we have seen, there are real challenges faced by those working towards interdisciplinarity that should not be underestimated. Second, from the experience of the MH we know there could be a danger is that DH all too easily becomes viewed as a 'soft' sub-field – a 'cosy' and 'pleasant' optional extra that is adjacent to, but only weakly connected with, the 'more important' work of mainstream researchers (Fitzgerald & Callard, 2016). Hoydis et al. (2023) are similarly critical from an EH perspective of the more simplistic reasons to engage with creative writing and the arts implied by some advocates – as a more effective or accessible (or pleasurable) form of information transfer, or simply because it offers an 'affective dimension' that evokes sympathy or empathy.[17]

To be effective, DH will require an approach that is based on a 'radical interdisciplinarity' (Charise, 2017, p. 444) that is able to transcend simplistic ideas about 'humanizing' development. Following Fitzgerald and Callard (2016), it will need to question mainstream models of disciplinary 'integration' and support work that is explicitly interdisciplinary. Their suggested metaphor of *entanglement* is useful here – namely, a critical approach that has the potential to challenge and 'reanimate' mainstream ideas and positions. It will also need to pay close attention to issues of transdisciplinarity. Alongside its role in DS teaching and research, a DH also has the potential to contribute to efforts to build 'a vibrant site of public learning and activism' beyond the university (Bird Rose et al., 2012). Finally, it will also need to consider the extent to which the ideas, tools and approaches discussed here are applicable and accessible in Global South contexts.

Notes

1 Different views exist about how 'the humanities' should be defined – including whether by subject matter, discipline or method. These debates are not the primary focus of this article.

2 Some have suggested that disciplinary knowledge has functioned as 'an abdication', in the sense of being too preoccupied with its own internal standards of logic and excellence, leading to an avoidance of larger responsibilities, and disciplines becoming 'exercises in logic chopping and nook dwelling expertise' (Frodeman, 2010).

3 It is also necessary to recognise the many barriers that make building meaningful interdisciplinarity difficult, including the excessive specialization of researchers, the lack of professional incentives to collaborate, and the tokenistic use of interdisciplinarity rhetoric by research funders or policy makers. Kanbur (2002) has warned of the 'lowest common denominator' problem, where the narrow rigour of disciplines is simply 'replaced by lack of clarity'.

4 These new fields have generated new research, journals and undergraduate and postgraduate teaching programmes around the world.

5 In some literature, the terms 'humanities' and 'arts and humanities' are often used interchangeably. For simplicity, the former is used here and includes the arts.

6 Others trace the origins of DS further back, making explicit links with earlier interventions by colonial authorities (Kothari, 2005), or with efforts to contain disorder during the dislocations and instability produced during industrialization in Western countries (Cowen & Shenton, 1995).

7 'Multidisciplinarity' refers to the idea that there are benefits from deliberately drawing on perspectives from more than one discipline. 'Interdisciplinarity' refers to more systematic attempts to integrate frameworks from different disciplines to explore questions 'which would not otherwise arise within the boundaries of a single discipline' (Harriss, 2002). 'Transdisciplinarity' normally refers to the inclusion of non-academic stakeholders in knowledge production, and to the idea of making knowledge products more pertinent to non-academic audiences; but it can also be used in a similar sense to interdisciplinarity.

8 There have been a few exceptions, such as efforts to link DS with natural science and engineering – for example in relation to increasing food crop production, or questions of agricultural mechanization (see for example Scoones, 2001).

9 Some might counter with the charge that understanding history – which is a humanities discipline – has always been a central concern of DS. This is certainly the case, but some historians have been critical of what they see as the limited ways in which development scholars as social scientists have attempted to undertake historical research (Woolcock et al., 2011).

10 There are also calls for de-centring the human in the face of environmental crisis, and that the non-human world is too important to be left purely to natural scientists (see Ghose, 2016; Tsing-Lowenhaupt et al., 2024). For example, Tsing-Lowenhaupt et al. (2024) call for both social scientists and humanities to pay more attention to the role of natural history in the project of colonialism, inviting us to see map making for example as more than simply illustrative and as defining and conceptualizing problems: 'By refusing the aesthetics of an unrooted, context-free art on the one hand, and expanding the sensual grip of the sciences, on the other, we show forms through which situated artists and creative scholars might co-create knowledge' (p. 8).

11 There are efforts to build a counter-narrative to STEM that emphasises the value of the Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy in the form of 'SHAPE'. See for example Holley (2004).

12 On the other side of the equation, the Development Humanities idea would also speak to the difficult position in which the humanities currently finds itself, having to justify their relevance in an increasingly currently hostile ideological and policy climate. Reporting on the links between 'culture wars' and cuts to the arts and humanities in the UK, journalist Zoe Williams (2024) quotes critical education theorist Henry Giroux's view that the humanities are 'inconvenient' to authoritarianism, because they promote pedagogical practice that 'calls students beyond themselves' and tend to foster an ethics of care, historical memory and resistance. Conversely, for an argument that scholars within the humanities might usefully learn lessons from the ways some economists have recently begun to draw on ideas from literature, see Kennedy (2020).

13 Also relevant here is Mbembe's (2016) call for the idea of a 'pluriversity' in which different epistemic traditions – Western and non-Western – can have a place, and de-centring the university from its increasing centrality to the neoliberal project of producing subjects equipped primarily for knowledge-based production in global markets.

14 Also potentially relevant is Spivak's concept of 'planetarity', a way of imagining alternatives to Eurocentrism, opening up other ways of reading and speaking to the urgency of threats to the planet itself. It perhaps resonates with anthropologist Arturo Escobar's (2018) idea of 'the pluriverse', which requires recognition of multiple worlds and ways of knowing.

15 See also Nita Mishra's (2025) discussion of 'arts-based methods' in development studies and an argument for 'the emancipatory potential' of critical poetic inquiry in understanding the lived realities of people in marginalised communities.

16 This idea differs from that of 'under-development' because of the way that it frames structural relation-ships as set in ways that preclude the possibility of reform and change, such as labour policies that delink economic activity from local market forces and make Palestinian labour dependent on demand from Israel (Roy, 1999).

17 For Terry Eagleton (1983), contrary to the position of those he calls 'liberal humanists', literary theory is inherently political and to be effective needs to engage with politics.

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Disclosure statement

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