

Working Toward Eternity

There was a library in Medan, Indonesia, that stayed open when “home” did not. I went there first to escape a house that held an illness I could not yet name, and I stayed because of what waited on the shelves. I was still a child when I pulled down Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s novel, *Rumah Kaca*, and encountered his conviction that a person may be brilliant beyond measure, yet, if they do not write, they will disappear from society and from history, and that writing is “working toward eternity”.¹ I did not understand the sentence at the time. I only knew it felt like a door. This essay reflects on both aspects of the question before me: the humanities shaped my path into higher education because literature was the only route that allowed a girl like me to achieve it, and the humanities have also shaped my experience within it because everything I am now studying, from power and political economy to violence and climate change, are examined through the humanistic questions I was first taught in the library.

Unable to afford books, I wrote them instead. The paradox still surprises me to this day. As a little girl who once collected coins outside a bookstore, I published nine children’s books with a leading Indonesian publishing house before turning 17. It wasn’t easy. My late father suffered from schizophrenia, and my mom still suffers from major depressive disorder. Fiction was the safest space, because home wasn’t.

The arithmetic of exclusion has barely shifted in my lifetime. In 2024, 273 million children, adolescents and youth remained out of school worldwide, including girls kept from classrooms by discriminatory laws and community practices.² By every such measure, higher education should not have happened to me. What interrupted that arithmetic was the humanities. Writing gave me a voice. I won a children’s story contest in the Province of North Sumatera that boosted my confidence. That confidence opened millions of doors I hadn’t known existed, including a Davis scholarship to United World College in India, a government scholarship for a bachelor’s in Romania, a one-year study exchange in Poland, and ultimately, an Erasmus Mundus master’s across three European universities. Books were my first passport long before I owned an actual one. Literature did more than teach me about inequality. It revealed the inner lives of the people trapped within it and inspired me to imagine a different life, one I had never dared to dream of before. For a child like I was, the humanities are not mere adornment in education. They are its gateway. Even if they become an obstacle, that obstacle arises when I feel that literature

¹ Toer, 1998

² UNESCO, 2026, p. V

makes me yearn for a life far greater than my own circumstances, so that the distance sometimes feels like a sorrow.

In 2017, still a teenager, I founded *Gubuk Literasi Bintang*, a community library in my neighbourhood, as I had been on the receiving end of the humanities and it was time to stand on the giving end. One of the first girls to come to us read the way I once did, as though the pages were rations. She carried her family's hardships and her father's long working hours into every session and slowly turned them into sentences. She went on to win a state scholarship. Today, she returns to run her own writing sessions for younger children at the university. This is the humanities reproducing themselves. A book becomes a reader, a reader becomes a writer, a writer becomes a door held open for someone else. Another child taught me a harder lesson, one I will not detail to protect her, but it shows how literacy work is inseparable from justice work. Some children carry violence that no book alone can answer. The afternoon I understood what she had survived is the afternoon my research questions were set.

I entered the International Relations and Political Economy arena, expecting to leave literature behind, only to discover I had never left the humanities. Instead, I had entered them from another side. Politics and economics tell me that "a woman is excluded", but the humanities (language, narrative, testimony, ethics) tell me "what it means" and "how it is lived". In 2024, I worked as an interpreter and translator for Social Development Direct, assisting UK researchers in interviewing activists from an Indonesian NGO about the intersection of gender-based violence and climate change. My task was to translate Pramodya Ananta Toer's thesis in its most literal, interdisciplinary form, carrying women's testimonies across languages so they would not vanish. Thus, what they knew could enter the written record of international climate policy. That research documented Indonesian women leaders threatened with lethal violence for organizing their communities' climate resilience and argued that such violence is an unseen barrier undermining climate action itself.³ The violence of environmental degradation and the violence against women are interlocking, not parallel, crises.⁴ My current research expands this scope to include issues of gender-based violence and climate change among Rohingya and Syrian refugee communities, who are not fully and legally protected by the international system in their host countries. A woman who is stateless, displaced, and unrecorded faces Pramodya's warning in its cruellest form: she can vanish not only from

³ Clugston, Rhodes, Nneli, and Fraser, 2024

⁴ Camey et al., 2020

history but from the present. As someone from the Global South who faced many hardships in the past, I study how to make the unwritten written.

I first read Pramoedya's line as a child's escape route. Write, and you will not disappear. At university, I came to understand it as a research methodology and a political act. The humanities carried me into higher education, held the door open behind me, and now shape the questions I ask of power itself. They are not three separate influences but one continuous education. I intend to spend my life writing people back into the record. This is what working toward eternity means.

References

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