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Musings of a Late Humanities Bloomer



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[Ousmane Sembène being Interviewed](#)

Growing up, I always knew I'd end up in a STEM career. Because of that, I treated anything outside STEM like background noise.

In high school, we had to take 11 subjects in our first two years, then drop 3 by the end of second year. I went in with my mind already made up: all the compulsory subjects, plus Geography and Electricity — “Geo-Elec,” as we called it. Geo-Elec had a reputation for being one of the craziest combinations, especially for internal exams, and looking back, that was exactly why I wanted it. The challenge. The identity. The respect. I liked the idea of being one of the “cracked” guys.

So I neglected History and Religious Education, since I *knew* I'd drop them anyway. That was the first of many mistakes made in the confidence of ignorance.

I hated poetry (too much interpretation, and somehow mine was always the “wrong” one). I used to proudly claim that the set books were the first novels I had ever actually read and finished — completely missing the point of why that mattered. If I'm being honest, the main reason I locked in for those subjects at all was because I needed to pass my national exams and get back to my beloved Physics and Math.

Then life did what it does.

I ended up at a liberal arts college with an engineering program. To be fair, I didn't fully understand what I had signed up for. I knew I'd get to study engineering, yes — mechanical, electrical, all that good stuff — but I hadn't really processed the *liberal arts* part.

I arrived on campus in Fall 2022, met with my advisor, and found out I had to fulfill distribution requirements. I was confused for a bit, then I did what any engineering student would do: I optimized the problem. Social sciences? Manageable. Intro econ, financial accounting, maybe a STEM-adjacent linguistics class (syntax), and I'm good. Humanities, though — that felt like the real obstacle.

I had what I thought was the perfect loophole: Logic in the philosophy department. Humanities credit without too much “humanities,” right? But between scheduling conflicts and the usual chaos of an engineering major at Swarthmore, I never took it. My first two years were packed. Sophomore year was especially brutal — pure STEM, zero breathing room, and Calc III had me questioning my relationship with mathematics. (That's a story for another day.)

Then something shifted.

Between campus protests and what was happening back home in Kenya, I started paying more attention to politics. While browsing courses, I found one called **Philosophies of Violence**, and it immediately caught my attention. The only thing that scared me was the reading load. For a STEM major, it looked massive (though I later learned our professor assigned *less* than many others in the department, which is hilarious in retrospect).

That class was an eye-opener.

I struggled with the readings — the volume, the density, all of it. But I loved the discussions. I loved hearing students who had taken several philosophy courses build arguments in real time. And because the class centered on violence, colonialism, and power, I could connect it to my own context:

Kenya's history under British rule, fragments of history I remembered, and questions I'd never really sat with before.

At the same time, I had long conversations with a close friend from Cameroon about French West Africa, displacement, and the anglophone-francophone tensions in Cameroon. He cares deeply about that history and knows it inside out. I could honestly listen to him talk about it for hours.

Somewhere in the middle of all that, I encountered **Frantz Fanon** — and that felt like a genuine turning point. I don't remember every detail from the readings now, but I remember the feeling of reading Fanon and realizing: *oh, this is what it feels like when a text grabs you*. I enjoyed those readings so much that I even bought a hard copy of *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Have I finished it? Barely. But still. Progress.

Fast forward to senior year.

By then, I had decided that my final spring semester needed to be one where I operated a bit more on my own terms — especially after an absurdly intense senior fall, and with a few unfinished distribution requirements that are, frankly, a little embarrassing for a senior. I briefly considered taking a class on the Qur'an and Islam, but then I saw a poster for a course on **West African film** and instantly knew: this is the one.

It has been one of the best academic experiences I've had.

I was blown away by the films and by the history behind them. It's wild to realize that as early as the 1960s, African filmmakers were producing incredibly powerful, sophisticated work — work that, in many cases, feels

more thoughtful than a lot of what we see now. One of the most profound figures I encountered was **Ousmane Sembène**. His view of film as a more accessible and politically potent medium than literature really stayed with me.

I appreciate that deeply.

I'm still becoming the kind of person who reads widely and consistently, but film became an entry point for me: stories that entertain, yes, but also teach, provoke, and mobilize. Still from the same class, I've come across filmmakers like **Djibril Diop Mambéty**, **Abderrahmane Sissako**, and more recently **Moussa Touré** — all very different, all incredibly effective in what they do.

The films are in French, and as someone who used to be a proud subtitles hater, I can confirm that character development is real.

Anyway, the point of this long story is simple: I've slowly come to appreciate the humanities, and in the process, I've come to understand the real value of a liberal arts education. Looking back, it's kind of insane how much I missed by writing off whole fields of thought for so long. But the good news is that it's not too late.

If any underclassmen — especially international students — are reading this: take the humanities classes. Talk to your professors. There is a huge world on the other side of the mountain.

Chikwanyi was right. I remember one of his rants about the point of a liberal arts education, and I have to admit, time has proven him right — at least from where I'm standing now.

I've got a long reading list waiting for me after graduation (I dropped a poli sci class because the syllabus had 10+ books and I got intimidated — baby steps), and I think I'll write more as I go.

African Film

Reflections

Liberal Arts

Ousmane Sembène

Frantz Fanon



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