
In Seeking “Home”: Ruins and the Aesthetics of Catastrophe

¹Oviyandi Emnur, ²Rachmi Diyah Larasati

¹Inisiatif Hidup Bersama Harimau

²Interdisciplinary Center for The Study of Global Change, University of Minnesota

Email: oviyandi32@gmail.com

*We venture forth, wet, trembling, and relieved to be alive.
The sky over our and wrecked and roofless is sodden and wet.*

(Audre Lorde “Of Generators and Survival-Hugo Letter”, 1991)

Earlier this year, in 2025, media artist Oviyandi Emnur ventured into the Gayo Lues forest to document a project by Azhari Aiyub, renowned for *Kura-Kura Berjanggut* and *Perempuan Pala*, the script and artistic director for *Hidup Bersama Harimau* (Living With Tiger), a play staged at Aceh Taman Budaya in Banda Aceh in July 2025. The production became a living cartography, a rhizome, and a fusing of choreography, costuming, stagecraft, visuals, and lighting, all energized by a committed creative team. The play was a collaborative performance project involving a team from many different fields. In this vibrant setting, bold ideas flourished, inspiring fresh perspectives on Acehnese performing art, where history, resilience, and faith shape community.

In this essay, we imagine Aceh as a constellation, its identity aglow with the energies of geopolitics, culture, and history (Fitri 2024, Djohar and Pruitt 2021; Hidayatullah 2024; Azhari 2015; Kartomi 2010; Grayman 2015). This backdrop leads us to the region’s story, shaped by encounters with Europe and iconic empire landmarks, ports, mountains, and palaces. From here, we spotlight Aceh’s role in ongoing debates about national belonging. To analyze these dynamics, our approach draws on Edward Said’s anti-colonial aesthetics (2015), guiding us as we unravel and reassemble archives. Additional frameworks—Avery Gordon’s idea of haunting, the notion of mutiny as the conscience of war (2020; 2026), and Mitamura and Larasati’s Political Economy of Racialized Death (2025)—further influence our lens. Rather than merely describing, we use creative imagination to reveal the web of relationships that bring each site to life.

We aim to do more than collect the stories of the displaced; we seek to wrestle with them and confront their conscience and complexity. This commitment shapes both the structure and emotional pulse of our analysis. To make these frameworks tangible, we examine the performance of *Hidup Bersama Harimau*, a play that marked a milestone of 2025 in Aceh’s artistic engagement before the flood. It explored the complex lives of

forest turn plantations (Li and Semedi 2021) and forest inhabitants—including community members, military personnel, police, forest officers, animals, and plants—highlighting the fragile relationships between humans and animals, as well as the tensions present in a militarized conservation landscape. At its heart is the tale of a dog, used to “seduce” the tiger, set in a forest alive with conservation politics. In this space, animals reflect the complexities of human nature.

The production powerfully turned ethnography into a living archive, combining narrative with politics on stage. Over three hours, a monologue stripped away memory and anxiety, challenging ideas of human-non-human boundaries and questioning the subjectivity of aesthetics (Larasati 2013), art, and animal intelligence. A standout scene—a satirical showdown between a tiger and an old female dog—bared human greed, hidden danger, and self-reflection.

As Aceh recovers from conflict and the tsunami, its resilience emerges through art that serves as both a vessel for mourning and a spark for resistance. Creative expression channels the community’s spirit into hope. The essay’s photographs trace intersections of performance, disaster, imagination, memory, the realities of military (Melvin et al. 2023; Robinson 1998), and shariah law (Feener et al. 2016, Idria 2024).

The performance itself has conveyed a strong trace of dialectical aesthetics (Fisher 2022), staging the livelihoods of forestry, human-animal relations, and traces of militarized sites. One of the sites in the story, the inspiration for the play, is *Hidup Bersama Harimau*, which the script recalls as a dog trapped by a tiger, a forest setting, conservation politics, and a symbolic animal that reflects and aestheticizes (Interview with Aiyub in Banda Aceh, 2025). The performance was powerful and enabled the ethnography to serve as a method for archive creation, narrative transmission, and the retelling of politics. A scene that involved multiple interventions with a monologue by a performer was a tracing of an intense memory of anxiety of being eaten and being a tool, being trapped. It materialized as an embodiment that decolonizes the global West of romanticism in the arts, narrative, and human-animal intelligence (Chen 2010). In this play, the tiger and the old female dog are in conversation—a powerful monologue performed by a brilliant artist, satirical in its reflection on humans. The animals are analyzing humans, including greed, a trap, and reflective seduction.

While Aceh is not at war now, its resilience in facing hardships stemming from the war (Colombijn and Lindblad 2002); and tsunamis recovery beyond the twentieth years, should inspire us to think about how necro politics share admiration and hope within aesthetic practice, highlighting the community’s enduring strength and capacity to overcome challenges, which are essential for fostering a sense of respect and optimism for others. This essay traces catastrophe and imagination. These photographs are also inspired by spatial and cultural-political memories, as well as by many strong traditions of communal religiosity, new culture, subculture, and livelihood arrangement.

This essay draws on a cartographic methodology, inspired by the dialogue between Lisa Lowe and Aurelia on photography (Azoulay et al. 2023). Building on their exchange, we are guided in narrating spaces shaped by the flood and those that flicker in and out of the play—spaces that vanish as places but resurface as texts within the political story. In this context, catastrophe becomes performative, as Lorde (1991) suggests. This performance invites us to stage and critically examine how space marks time through speculative power,

and how catastrophe imprints itself on conscience and geopolitics, thereby normalizing disappearance and violence (Mitamura and Larasati 2025). Ultimately, this conversation between aesthetic practices traces different connections between space and the capitalist script.

Oviyandi Emnur (the first author in this photo essay) was in Banda Aceh when the flood began on November 26 and continued until November 27. He then actively volunteered and participated in a coordination effort to distribute help with a group of volunteers in Aceh. The second author, Larasati, is also an editor of this special issue and researched sound, mining, and displacement in Aceh, and was in the audience for the performance *Hidup Bersama Harimau*, which was staged just a few months before the flood.

These pictures are notes on the condition in which Aceh tries to reimagine itself after a long conflict and militarized experience, tsunami, and survive amid many events, floods, landslides, and their post-recovery management, political, catastrophic, ruinous, and religious Sharia law. Yet also reflect: the indirect shadow, trust, coordination, special arrangements, international mechanisms, and, of course, the Memorandum of Understanding between Aceh and the Indonesian state, which had been celebrated for 20 years in 2025. Through this photo essay, we argue that site, space, and value are interchangeable, and that, like breathing, the spatial is temporal.

Picture 1 and 2. Ismatul Rahmi is playing a character as an old female dog in this theatre *Hidup Bersama Harimau*





Source: Oviyandi Emnur

This picture was taken at Taman Budaya Aceh in July 2025. Performed by Ismatul Rahmi, a monologue that lasts for three hours. The audience stayed and was captivated by the strength of her stage presence. The play is, and the team, the artistic work is an interdisciplinary collaborative effort. The picture marked a specific wealth of creative innovation and environmentally conscious artistic choices by the Aceh community. The work conveys many stories of a time, layered, speculative, yet materialized. This performance was written and staged by Azhari Aiyub, who served as a producer and scriptwriter.

Picture 3. We see roses on Glassdoor in Gayo Lues, standing out as intensely beautiful and displaced amid catastrophes.



Source: Oviyandi Emnur

These pictures evoke spatial memories of debris in many family gatherings and celebrations, a space, a geography of ruins, and capture a long history of resistance and resilience, the spatial character of both, a history of mass catastrophes. In this picture, roses stood out as a symbol of fragile longing and an author's remembrance of different enactments of brightness and worth paying attention to, like a glass or a mirror in modernity. It is like a promise of beauty, a paradox of aesthetic despite catastrophe (Nguyen 2024).

Aceh has experienced many catastrophes, such as tsunamis (2004) and floods (2025), as well as a militarized zone. The intimacy of life, between violence and literature as a creative potential, marks many long-established cosmopolitanisms by their early European encounters and relations (Casale 2005). In 2014, when 1,000 military men danced Saman (a dance that has been globalized through students' associations, diaspora, and state representatives), and 12,500 state officers and police also performed the dance, it signaled a softening of relations between Aceh and Jakarta, the center of government (Kartomi 2010).

Aceh, currently a province of Indonesia, was known as a strong regional state and island for many reasons, including its role in the preceding Indonesian Independence narrative, its large Exxon (now ARUN) operations, and many timber and other mining operations. Even though Aceh is far from Turkey, the history of the Ottoman Empire leaves traces in the ocean and trade, European invasion, and other stories (see Casale and Calcagni 2025; Aiyub 2018). Aceh is also a place where the world saw a full pledge of support in 2004 when the tsunami hit and displaced many families, and many also died. In a conversation with Azhari Aiyub, we learned that Aceh's identity politics was a militarized zone from 1989 to 1999. During that time, the special operation Operasi Jaring Merah (OJM), involving KOPASSUS (the army's special forces), created a paradoxical situation—a complex web of power that was both visible and fragile, yet sometimes concealed (telephone conversation with Azhari Aiyub in preparation for Brown University's talk, 2024).

During this flood, Aceh experienced further chaos, and marginalized policies resulted in the region's isolation, hunger, illness, and displacement. In that context of hunger, we have been reminded about: "Makan Siang Gratis" (free meals), "... promised free meals through various subsidy cuts. While this pledge may seem feasible with state wealth, its long-term sustainability could lead to broken promises and fuel disillusionment among the populace. From the perspective of the middle class, this represents an economic and intellectual affront" (Aiyub & Larasati, unpublished manuscript 2025).

Picture 4. We cross the bridge many times, seemingly exercising with a rubber, Tripe Jaya, Gayo Lues 2025



Source: Oviyandi Emnur

Picture 5. We see a wooden ruin, an artefact, stuck in the window, covered by branches and dry mud. In this picture, we see an archive of timber and spatial markings (Pidie Jaya, 2025).



Source: Oviyandi Emnur

The disaster swept into Pining, unsettling the rhythms of those who have always shared their world with the forest and its tigers. To us, Pining is not just a village; it is where the heartbeat of traditional forest guardianship pulses, as Sammy Kalifa (local journalist) once described. Tucked within the wild Bukit Barisan, where steep hills rise, and a river carves its way through stone, Pining now wears the wounds of the flood. Heavy mud smothers the places where people and tigers once lived in quiet partnership, wiping away the footprints of their intertwined lives.

Picture 6. Pining Gayo Lues



Source: Oviyandi Emnur

In tracing spatial knowledge, as ways of knowing, and therefore in these photographs, creating an archive of time, value, and its speculative. It is not wartime, but the lingering of belonging, as the key word is 'stay,' and the stage of Azhari's plays charts the anxiety of relationality. A trust that was broken. It is like the female dog's story (anjing betina) in *Hidup Bersama Harimau*. The animal has understood that its meat is meant for the tiger's food and its trap. It is an essay of betrayal, hope, and longing, this longing for the nation, the beloved.

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