

INDONESIAN NOTEBOOK REPRISED: ON HISTORICAL ACCURACY, MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES, AND ALTERNATIVE FACTS

Brian Russell Roberts and
Keith Foulcher

In his 1956 book *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, the famous African American writer Richard Wright narrates and reflects on his trip to Indonesia to attend the Asian-African Conference of 1955, held in the city of Bandung. Part 1 of *The Color Curtain* portrays Wright in Europe gathering information, embarking on a “search for the emotional landscapes of Asia” ahead of his upcoming trip to Indonesia.¹ During this fact-finding through Europe, as *The Color Curtain* narrates, Wright interviews several unnamed informants, including one “Mr. X,” who is described with so much precision that he can, with certainty, be identified as Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, one of mid-twentieth-century Indonesia’s most prominent cultural figures and a major innovator of the Indonesian language (spoken today by about 200 million people). In *The Color Curtain*, Wright offers the following evaluation of Takdir: “Regrettably, one could safely assume that his influence upon Asian reality would be nil.”²

Brian Russell Roberts is Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of American Studies at Brigham Young University. Keith Foulcher is an Honorary Associate in the Department of Indonesian Studies at the University of Sydney.

¹ Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1956), in Richard Wright, *Black Power: Three Books from Exile*, ed. Cornel West (New York: HarperPerennial, 2008), 453.

² For the quotation, see Wright, *The Color Curtain*, 472; for Wright’s account of the interview, see *ibid.*, 464–72.

In researching and writing our book, *Indonesian Notebook: A Sourcebook on Richard Wright and the Bandung Conference* (Duke, 2016), we were struck by Wright's multi-page account of this interview—less because of Wright's uninformed belief that Takdir's influence on Asian reality would be nil and more because of Wright's strange decision to report that he had interviewed Takdir in Europe before the conference. As we knew from reading Wright's travel journal, he had actually met, interviewed, and associated with Takdir in Indonesia during his April 12 to May 5, 1955, visit to that country.³ And while we further investigated *The Color Curtain's* strange representation of the Wright-Takdir interview in Europe, we realized (looking at a hand-corrected early draft of *The Color Curtain*) that Wright had originally not planned on suggesting that he had interviewed Takdir in Europe. At a certain point, however, he made the decision to change his wording so that, within the published version of the book, the interview would be staged as taking place in Europe.⁴ Commenting on other apparently similar authorial fabrications in Wright's Indonesian travel writings, Wright's Dutch translator Margrit de Sablonière believed it was “Wright's right as an author to ‘kind [of] create figures.’”⁵ Nevertheless, such poetic liberties within a book subtitled *A Report on the Bandung Conference* seemed to us to merit correction. These corrections seemed all the more urgent given the pride of place that Wright's *The Color Curtain* has had within historical and cultural narratives of the Bandung Conference and upon developments in postcolonial thought.

In saying this, we do not wish to imply that there can be a single “truthful” account of Wright's 1955 visit to Indonesia. Indeed, we outlined one of our intentions in compiling *Indonesian Notebook* as follows: “[T]his collection is not doctrinaire in its reprinting of primary historical sources; agnostically, it reprints or relays primary sources that contradict each other and do not necessarily offer authoritative versions of events. Rather, if it is doctrinaire on any point, it is in its commitment to the rich polyvocality of narratives regarding Wright's interactions with modern Indonesia and the Bandung Conference.” However, in conjunction with valorizing these competing and conflicting histories, we also stated, “this book is committed to the verifiable materiality of certain facts.”⁶

This was a dedication to re-examining the historical record of Wright's encounter with Indonesia and the decolonizing world in 1955. In pursuing this dedication, we wrote introductory essays for each document contained in *Indonesian Notebook*, striving in every case for accuracy (as far as this was possible) in our accounts of the historical, biographical, and cultural sources that we uncovered in our research. We undertook this task in the hope of countering what we perceived as the series of misunderstandings, mistranslations, and miscommunications that characterized Wright's encounter with Indonesia in 1955 and the way it has been understood and represented in subsequent scholarly work. *Indonesian Notebook* is a project centered on bringing accurate accounts of Indonesian voices to the fore.

³ For a discussion of *The Color Curtain* and Wright's travel journal on this point, see Brian Russell Roberts and Keith Foulcher, eds., *Indonesian Notebook: A Sourcebook on Richard Wright and the Bandung Conference* (Durham: Duke University Press), 10–11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 29, note 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

In light of these commitments, it was with great interest that we read Howard Federspiel's review of *Indonesian Notebook*, recently published in *Indonesia* 102 (October 2016).⁷ We are pleased that *Indonesia* dedicated space to publishing a review of our book, and we are indebted to Federspiel for undertaking the professional service of writing the review. To be sure, we appreciate his praise for the volume ("what is needed is precisely what the editors have provided")⁸ as well as his few suggestions on missed opportunities to strengthen the volume. And yet our commitment to offering accurate information about Indonesia's place in Wright's Bandung Conference travels causes us to feel particularly concerned by some factual inaccuracies in Federspiel's review. On one level, we are concerned that readers of the review may mistakenly believe that Federspiel has drawn his inaccurate information from our book. But more significantly, it is disconcerting that the review unleashes numerous inaccuracies regarding Wright's trip and its Indonesian responses, poorly serving students, scholars, and others who may consult the review hoping to arrive at a basic understanding of the Bandung Conference and Wright's intertwined Indonesian sojourn.

First, some basic facts regarding history and our book bear reiteration. The Bandung Conference took place in 1955 and not, as the review suggests, in 1954. And the "official Bandung Conference" was not "held" at the Hotel Swarha in Bandung, as Federspiel avers. It is true that in *Indonesian Notebook* Seno Joko Suyono states that "more than a hundred" local and foreign reporters stayed at the Swarha. But, as noted elsewhere in our book, the conference itself was held in major public buildings, the most prominent of which was the Gedung Merdeka, the former Dutch Concordia Club building, renamed and refurbished as a venue for the conference's plenary sessions.⁹ Of our English-language translations of the Indonesian- and Dutch-language primary sources showcased in the collection, Federspiel states: "None of the pieces extend beyond five pages."¹⁰ Although many of the pieces are indeed shorter than five pages, two of the key documents in the collection are longer than this: Wright's newly recovered 1955 lecture "The Artist and His Problems" (previously published only in Indonesian, under the title "Seniman dan Masaalahnja"), and Beb Vuyk's 1960 essay "A Weekend with Richard Wright" (previously published in Dutch under the title "Weekeinde met Richard Wright").

Second, we would point toward another level of inaccuracy. Federspiel reports that the famous Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer "cited the 'bitter realism' of Wright's [novel] *Native Son*."¹¹ But in his essay "The Definition of Literature and the Question of Beauty" (as included in *Indonesian Notebook*), Pramoedya credits Wright's memoir *Black Boy* for this bitter realism.¹² Elsewhere, the review suggests that Wright referred to the Dutch-Indonesian novelist Beb Vuyk as a "little, yellow woman" and

⁷ Howard Federspiel, review of Roberts and Foulcher, eds., *Indonesian Notebook: A Sourcebook on Richard Wright and the Bandung Conference*, *Indonesia* 102 (October 2016): 137–40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁹ For Seno's commentary and mention of the Gedung Merdeka, see Roberts and Foulcher, *Indonesian Notebook*, 219, 78.

¹⁰ Federspiel, review, 137.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹² Roberts and Foulcher, *Indonesian Notebook*, 47.

that Wright's Indonesian hosts took offense at this.¹³ But this phrase does not appear in our book and we are unaware that Wright used it in reference to Vuyk or anyone else. Here, Federspiel may have confused two moments in *Indonesian Notebook*: one in which Vuyk referred to Wright as a "plump little man" and another in which Wright biographer Constance Webb referred to Vuyk as a "fat woman with a yellow complexion."¹⁴

Whatever the origins of Federspiel's quotation of Wright on Vuyk, this inaccurate quotation itself leads to further inaccuracies within the review: "The Konfrontasi writers [of Vuyk's circle] especially found Wright's description of Beb Vuyk as a 'little, yellow woman' as a slight, and inappropriate, when she had spent considerable time with him and treated him well personally and professionally."¹⁵ As far as we are aware, Federspiel's narrative of the offense taken by the Konfrontasi writers on this point is just as indebted to imagination as is the offending quotation. Certainly, neither the quotation nor the narrative regarding the quotation appears in our book. In an analogous moment, Federspiel's review alleges that the writers of the Konfrontasi Study Club (which hosted Wright) were disappointed with Wright's written misrepresentations of them but that they ultimately "excused his failures as simply unfortunate in the whimsical financial world of professional writing, where a publisher's views of whether a publication would sell well often determined whether a work would be accepted for publication."¹⁶ The fact is, *Indonesian Notebook* offers no such narrative of the Konfrontasi Study Club making financial excuses on behalf of Wright. (For those interested in Wright's commentary on commercial writing in the context of book clubs and well-financed magazines, we would point toward the lecture he gave for PEN Club Indonesia in Jakarta.)¹⁷

We could go on. Indeed, when we highlighted the inaccurate portions of the review, we found that we had marked at least 40 percent of the second page (page 138). Within the highlighted portion is the suggestion that the Konfrontasi writers themselves objected to Wright's decision to represent his interview with Takdir Alisjahbana as having taken place in Europe. This is not part of the narrative we offer in *Indonesian Notebook*, and although such objections may have existed, we did not find any evidence for such a narrative in our research. Other pages harbored fewer though nonetheless substantial inaccuracies. Our impulse to respond to the review reminds us of the written response by Wright's host Mochtar Lubis to what he characterized as Wright's misreporting on the words of several Indonesian cultural figures. Mochtar relayed the opinions of some of Wright's Indonesian interlocutors: "They are all amazed to read Mr. Wright's notebook in which Mr. Wright quotes them saying things which they never had said, or to which they did not put meaning as accepted by Mr. Wright."¹⁸

¹³ Federspiel, review, 138.

¹⁴ Roberts and Foulcher, *Indonesian Notebook*, 195, 231.

¹⁵ Federspiel, review, 138.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁷ Roberts and Foulcher, *Indonesian Notebook*, 122–37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

In bringing all this to readers' attention, our intention is not to be nitpicky, but rather to reinforce one of *Indonesian Notebook's* central projects, which is to provide readers with access to accurate accounts of the long-observed and long-ignored Indonesian- and Dutch-language record surrounding Wright's 1955 Indonesian sojourn and his influential account of the Bandung Conference in *The Color Curtain*. Perhaps more importantly, our response to the review is a plea, in this new age of "alternative facts," for the continued importance of scholarship that can acknowledge multiple perspectives and narratives while still evincing a dedication to drawing circumspectly from the available historical evidence.