

Doreen Lee. *Activist Archives: Youth Culture and the Political Past in Indonesia*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. 276 pp.

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Doreen Lee's vivid and important book, *Activist Archives*, takes us back to the recent past, the era of activist resistance against the Suharto regime and the reform period that followed. At the center of this history is a modern sort of national hero, the middle-class youth activist of Generation 98. Borrowing from the revolutionary era yet also new, this activist is educated, tech-savvy, itinerant, angry, and stylish. This activist is also keenly aware of the passage of time, compulsively documenting and archiving the present for a future when the moment might feel past. In a global moment of youth social and populist movements, Lee's analysis provides an urgent and sophisticated map of how political forms fall in and out of salience. A poignant inversion of modernist ideology, Lee's account depicts a world where it could be reasonable to suggest that Indonesia's past has become the world's present.

Lee guides us through Jakarta's streets, makeshift offices, sleeping quarters, and other urban spaces that activists occupied in their efforts to reclaim early twentieth century nationalist, anticolonial revolutionary zeal for the anti-Suharto struggle. Her approach does more than document, hers is a sensory argument. The transformation of a late 20th-century *remaja*, with his middle-class tastes or her respectable preferences, into a proper *pemuda* was executed through not just political courage but aesthetic form. While most Indonesians can instantly recognize the cultural figure known as the activist, Lee takes that assumed knowledge seriously, unpacking small, stylistic details as features of a type of citizen whose creative repurposing of the past and particular subculture was essential to the very real political demands they also made.

A conundrum lay at the heart of the anti-Suharto youth movement: could a *pemuda* be truly critical of the New Order? Given that *pemuda* history had been so thoroughly co-opted by the regime's ideology, a new youth movement could only extend inspiration of the revolutionary past so far, and then would need to create a new, specific identity. Lee's central argument sensitively relays this condition. The *semangat pemuda* (or "teen spirit") Indonesian citizens know so intimately from official history generated a particular affective progeny, what Lee calls "*pemuda* fever." Lee situates these examples in theoretical conversation with Jacques Derrida's concept of "archive fever," the impulse to "compulsively document, consign, and assemble signs" (11) from the present in preemptive nostalgia for the time when it will be past, driving "... an irrepressible desire to return to the origin" (91).¹ Conceiving of youth activism in this way relays twinned qualities at the heart of Generation 98, the assumption that nationalism is fundamentally a youthful form, and the idea that youth are most open to the sort of radical break with the past that revolution requires. As a result, what

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¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

appears to be a rejection of history is instead an “incision” into the body politic (15). Ironically, this temporality drove Generation 98 itself into a sort of irrelevance. As *reformasi* has stalled and as the forms of demonstration and political communication styled as democratic have both normalized and become more militantly conservative, the same activists who were hailed as heroes might now seem ossified and, almost predictably, out of style.

But what were the forms through which activists came to be recognizable? How were their dreams rendered visible, and therefore valuable? How does it feel to be compelled by *pemuda* fever? Lee takes us through a series of spaces and embodiments to relay the political habitus of the youth activist. Through sympathetic yet critical eyes, she acknowledges what has now become conventional wisdom about the 1998 resistance movement: that it was populated by middle-class, college-educated, globally oriented urban youth. Those facts have all too often come to suggest that these activists were therefore bourgeois and only invested in reform insofar as it affected their class compatriots, rather than dedicated to thoroughgoing social justice. While these demographic facts may be true, Lee’s ethnographic sensibility moves us far beyond these easy assumptions about their political commitments. Instead, we come to feel both the urgency and, importantly, the banality of *pemuda* fever. For example, the activists’ impulse to document required endless photocopying, a constant quest for finding and preserving the fading brochures, posters, or other propaganda from student movements in the decade leading up to 1998, and these documents’ nearly magical ability to disappear and reappear in unexpected moments. And if chasing and preserving paper was a full-time job, Lee reminds us that these activists were largely volunteers. Budgets for each initiative minutely tracked expenses for food, water, t-shirts, and copying—but not salaries.

Similarly, Generation 98 created unusual spatial zones. Perhaps the foremost space for activism was the most obvious, the urban street. The street could accommodate and signify a political ideal through mixing citizens—both middle-class and poor, urban and rural—all in the community of the *rakyat*. Indeed, the most familiar images of political expression in 1998, and since, have relied on the spectacular quality of mass demonstrations that, through their sheer size, ventriloquize a popular voice seemingly speaking in one register, and whose heft could stop traffic and militaries alike. Lee starts with this familiar image, but then guides us to the inside of this public form, where we spend time in a variety of hybrid spaces. The *basekamp* is where archival drudgery and strategic planning occurred in-between cigarettes, coffee, boredom, and sleep. The *posko*, or command post, borrowed New Order authority to survey and report from small junctures throughout the city for the right to do the same for the revolutionary movement. The *kost* similarly provided an in-between space for activist rejuvenation. The café offered internet access and food. Neither public nor private, *kosts* were effectively halfway houses, places where some of the comforts of home and propriety applied, but were mostly recognizable for what they were not, neither street nor home. On this point, Lee is especially compelling, as she complicates what has become accepted knowledge about the rather rigid public/private divide in New Order Indonesia. Rather than a chaotic public sphere opposed to a disciplined domestic order, Lee shows how blurring those boundaries was central to the activist ethic. The gendered dynamics of these spaces is telling. While the *pemuda* aesthetic was

broadly masculine, these hybrid spaces allowed women to join the cause without automatically threatening their reputations.

Lee is especially gifted at capturing the importance of style to these political goals. Activism required a particular consumer aesthetic, one that refused new-money excess but which nonetheless trafficked in rare and therefore valuable commodities. Suffering through long, repetitive, hot protests revealed one's political commitment, but it was made easier if one had access to bottled water, boxed snacks, and other small creature comforts that alleviated activist suffering. Much like membership in a country club, other activists could recognize each other by symbols of activist belonging. Perhaps no symbol was more important than the limited edition t-shirt, although stickers could be a close second. Made inexpensively, on demand, and in small batches, these embodied signs of allegiance and were both affordable yet precious, as they displayed access, timeliness, and overall cool. In that sense, they were no different from any other fashion statement: they demonstrated just what one wanted to convey at a demonstration.

That Generation 98 had its own commitment to form should therefore not be surprising. All subcultures deploy signs to declare their community boundaries. Lee places the styles of Generation 98 in the deeper national history of Indonesia, however, in which appearance and form have been fundamental modes of mobilization. The revolution is not only a ubiquitous part of official national history in Indonesia, it has also been an iconic subject in the anthropology of nationalism. The years leading up to and during the 1940s struggle for independence from Dutch colonialism in the Indies have become the essence, if not the yardstick, for analyses of nationalist fervor around the world. Benedict Anderson's now widely applied concept of imagined communities was inspired by the fraternal bonds he recognized in mass circulated dreams of independence in the Indies.² Mary Steedly's analyses of veteran memories revealed how accounts of revolutionary violence complicate our conceptions of both war and narrative.³ Both accounts have been inspirational for capturing, and sometimes sharing, the zeal of nationalism. Lee's account takes up the questions of independence and change in the "immanent revolution found in everyday life" (21). As a result, the book is an invaluable contribution to scholarship on Indonesia, but by extension to the scholarship on democratic struggle more broadly.

One could say that the moment Generation 98 feared has arrived. Their era has, indeed, passed, and contemporary youth now see it as sufficiently remote as to feel nostalgia for it. Yet perhaps this is not disheartening. As Lee reminds us, the fact that activism has become average is not a bad thing. Perhaps it can appear with new styles, new tastes, and new people to address new crises.

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

³ Mary Steedly, *Rifle Reports: A Story of Indonesian Independence* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013).

