

BOOK REVIEWS

Activist Archives: Youth Culture and the Political Past in Indonesia, by Doreen Lee, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016, xi + 278 pp., US\$24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978 0 822361 71 8

In *Activist Archives: Youth Culture and the Political Past in Indonesia*, American anthropologist Doreen Lee tells the story of the Indonesian radical student movement that helped end the 32-year dictatorial government of General Suharto in May 1998. Combining historical research and ethnographic analysis, Lee gives colourful descriptions of the nationalist sentiments, class and generational structures, and organisational and private spaces in which the youth activists operated in the 1980s and 1990s. She discusses the interactions between collective history, individual and community memory, and how they came to define youth identity and political ideas in a period of political transition.

Archivist Archives offers some insights into the value that archives held among Indonesian youth activists. According to Lee, youth activists did not regard documentation as a scarce resource. ‘There was always more and more stuff to make, disseminate and discard, in keeping with a productivity level required for activists to stay relevant in contemporary politics’ (p. 39). Nevertheless, in hindsight, activists later regretted a long list of lost and untraceable documents and ‘hinted that missing archives contained secrets that would “complete” their history’ (p. 39). The need for secrecy is a factor that hindered the construction of the archives. Some sensitive records had to be ‘burnt after reading’ (pp. 44–5), removing the possibility of them ever making it to the archives. In the absence of physical records, Indonesian radicals clung to their memories of landmark historical events that they had witnessed, such as Suharto’s resignation, ‘a moment that had left its mark on their persons as memory-object, lodged deep’ (p. 39).

Lee draws on Derrida to theorise how ‘the drive to document, consign, and assemble signs of pemuda [youth] nationalism’ became a fever (p. 11) or, quoting from Derrida’s 1996 *Archive Fever*, ‘a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin’ (p. 91). The youth activists from Generation 98 or the Reformasi (Reform) Generation were moved by a ‘historically charged present’, which Lee calls ‘pemuda fever’ (p. 11). However, in her writing, ‘pemuda fever’ becomes synonymous with youth politics in general or youthful passions rather than with a fever to document and archive (pp. 179, 210).

Despite its title, *Activist Archives* is not a book about archives. It is a book written by a social anthropologist who used archival materials to further her research into the Indonesian youth activist movement. The author makes use of a variety of archival sources, including materials from the Indonesian Activism collection of the International Institute for Social History in the Netherlands, and Indonesian student literature kept at Cornell University’s South Kroch Asia Library. She also draws on materials from her private collection, which she accumulated during her 18-month fieldwork in Indonesia in 2003–05 and several subsequent visits. Her personal collection includes ‘diaries, T-shirts, drawings, text messages, newspaper clippings, books, magazines, and numerous other fragments that activists shared with [her]’ (p. 6). She also consulted court documents from the high-profile subversion trials of youth activists in 1996 and 1997. She exploits a variety of archival documents to support her analysis. However, her book does not include a discussion of the nature and characteristics of the activist archives that she used.

The book’s chapters examine the different facets that characterised everyday activist life in Indonesia in the 1980s and 1990s. They are titled ‘Archive’, ‘Street’, ‘Style’, ‘Violence’, ‘Home’ and ‘Democracy’, each dealing with a particular aspect of the activists’ lives and cultural production.

Each chapter relies on an analysis of primary sources, including paper ephemera from the anti-government demonstrations and interviews with youth activists. The analysis of the different spaces in which the youth activists operated opens the way to a multifaceted discussion of youth activism rich in details and nuances. Unfortunately, the author does not venture into a related discussion of the dispersed nature of the archives or the concept of archive as a place.

Activist Archives is an important contribution to the fields of urban ethnography and youth studies and to the history of youth radicalism in Indonesia. It presents readers with some examples of previously unstudied archival materials which deserve more attention from archivists.

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The Silence of the Archive, by David Thomas, Simon Fowler and Valerie Johnson, Principles and Practice in Records Management and Archives series (Series Editor: Geoffrey Yeo), Facet Publishing, London, 2017, 224 pp., GBP£64.95 (paperback), ISBN 978 1 783301 55 3

The Silence of the Archive is a fascinating book that explores ‘the causes, responses and implications’ (p. XXV) of silences in the archives. Silences are a worthy topic since ‘an absence is not nothing, but is rather the space left by what has gone ... the emptiness indicates how once it was filled and animated’ (Steedman as quoted on p. 105). The silence of the archive can take the form of ‘the absence of records from public view, the absence of certain details in records ... or the absence of records altogether’ (p. XV), writes Anne Gilliland; the record ‘may be silent on the salient facts, or it may obfuscate, mislead or flat out lie’. On the other hand some silences are ‘tacit agreements ... designed to leave unsaid or let slip away things that may be too painful’ (p. XVI).

The book is directed at ‘archivists, records managers, researchers and records creators’ (p. XXV), and anyone interested in the study of archives. All three authors – Simon Fowler, Valerie Johnson and David Thomas – have worked at the National Archives, UK and at various UK universities, and collectively have expertise in digital preservation, history, teaching, research and archives. The passion and creativity of the authors is most evident when they discuss themes related to their own work, and these are also the best chapters. Fowler, Johnson and Thomas each authored two chapters within the main body of the text, with Thomas also authoring the introduction and conclusion.

In the first two chapters (‘Enforced silences’ and ‘Inappropriate expectations’), Simon Fowler examines the following: the content of the archive and of the records extant; the impact the powerful have in influencing the archives; and, to a lesser extent, archival practices regarding acquisition and appraisal. Fowler argues that silences brought on by archival practice could be avoided by including better contextual and descriptive metadata within collections, which also ensures transparency around archival terminology and processes. Paraphrasing Tom Nesmith, Fowler writes: ‘it is essential to describe appraisal decisions’ (p. 56), and, according to series editor Geoffrey Yeo, ‘descriptions should give credit to ... [all] who have intervened in shaping collections over time’ (p. 57). These are not new ideas but nor are they yet common practices, as many archives sustain processes, systems and practices founded on old paradigms.