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Book Review: Activist Archives: Youth Culture and the Political Past in Indonesia

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Abstract

This book review critically engages with *Activist Archives: Youth Culture and the Political Past in Indonesia* (2016) by Doreen Lee, an ethnographic exploration of youth activism and memory in post-authoritarian Indonesia. Lee introduces the concept of "activist archives", informal, affectively charged, and often ephemeral collections such as zines, graffiti, and digital media, through which young Indonesians documented and preserved the spirit of the 1998 Reformasi movement. Drawing on fieldwork, interviews, and cultural analysis, Lee positions these archives as both tools of political resistance and repositories of public memory that contest official state narratives. The book is deeply interdisciplinary, drawing from political anthropology, memory studies, and Southeast Asian history. Lee also engages with broader themes such as affect, cultural production, and transnational solidarity, showing how global protest frameworks are locally articulated. This review assesses the book's methodological strengths, theoretical contributions, and relevance to contemporary political activism, particularly in societies transitioning from authoritarian rule.

Keywords: Youth activism, political memory, Indonesia, activist archives, authoritarianism, Doreen lee, Reformasi movement, cultural resistance

Introduction

Doreen Lee's *Activist Archives: Youth Culture and the Political Past in Indonesia* is a deeply analytical and richly textured ethnographic exploration of the pivotal role youth activism has played in Indonesia's modern political transformation. Focusing on the post-Suharto era, Lee introduces the concept of "activist archives", the varied and often improvised means through which young Indonesians documented, remembered, and re-engaged with the collective political struggles that fueled the Reformasi movement. Drawing upon extensive fieldwork, personal observations, and interviews conducted during a transitional moment in Indonesia's democratic development, Lee situates her work within the country's tumultuous political history, particularly under the authoritarian rule of President Suharto from 1967 to 1998. She shows how university students and youth activists became critical agents of resistance, organizing mass demonstrations, disseminating subversive materials, and creatively preserving these efforts through media such as pamphlets, graffiti, independent zines, and digital communication. These activist archives, often fragile, unofficial, and scattered, emerge as essential repositories of memory that challenge the dominant state narratives and help preserve the grassroots history of political resistance.

Lee's introduction deftly weaves together political theory, cultural anthropology, and Southeast Asian studies to frame the activist archive as a dynamic and contested site where individual affect, public memory, and sociopolitical agency converge. Her sensitive attention to the emotional and symbolic weight carried by these archives reveals how deeply the experience of activism imprints itself on the identities and futures of those involved, many of whom risked violence, exile, or death. Through this lens, Lee not only captures the immediacy of youth action but also illuminates how memory itself becomes a field of resistance. The introduction sets the stage for a broader examination of how historical documentation, performance, and digital storytelling contribute to democratic aspirations, making clear that youth movements are not merely reactive episodes but enduring forces in the shaping of political consciousness and collective identity across generations.

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Summary of the Book

Doreen Lee's *Activist Archives: Youth Culture and the Political Past in Indonesia* (2016) is a methodologically rich and conceptually nuanced ethnographic account of youth political activism during and after the authoritarian New Order regime (Orde Baru) under President Suharto, who ruled Indonesia from 1967 until his resignation in May 1998. The book systematically examines the role of student movements and youth networks in producing what Lee calls "activist archives", a constellation of unofficial, dispersed, and often ephemeral artifacts and practices that serve not only as historical records but also as tools of political engagement, affective memory, and resistance.

From the outset, Lee (2016)^[5] situates her research within the intersecting fields of political anthropology, Southeast Asian studies, and memory studies. She asserts that youth activism in Indonesia, particularly during the lead-up to the Reformasi movement, was not merely a series of spontaneous political actions but rather a deeply embedded cultural process of archiving dissent. Drawing on participant observation, in-depth interviews, and analysis of underground publications, Lee traces the development of this "archival consciousness" as a mode of political agency (Lee, 2016, pp. 1-15)^[5].

In mapping youth activism from the 1960s through the critical juncture of 1998, Lee foregrounds the centrality of university students (*mahasiswa*) as both intellectual catalysts and frontline protestors. She echoes earlier scholars like Lev (2021)^[6], who documented how Indonesian student movements have historically operated as moral guardians of the nation, and Benedict Anderson (1990)^[1], who conceptualized the student as a recurring figure in Southeast Asian political transformations. Lee expands on this historiography by showing how youth movements forged alternative forms of political expression through zines, graffiti, manifestos, video recordings, street performances, and digital media, all of which challenged state-controlled narratives and asserted counter-hegemonic versions of national identity (Lee, 2016, pp. 47-66)^[5].

Importantly, Lee does not treat the archive in its conventional institutional form. Instead, she builds upon theorists like Stoler (2002)^[9], who argue for the study of "the archive as subject" rather than merely as source. In Lee's analysis, activist archives are mobile, fragile, and affectively charged objects. They are circulated informally, often in photocopied or handwritten formats, and are sometimes shared across kitchen tables, street corners, and dormitories, spaces not usually considered legitimate sites of historical preservation. These archives are therefore not simply repositories of information, but performative acts of remembering, bearing witness, and inspiring further political engagement (Lee, 2016, pp. 55-56)^[5].

Lee further explores how these archives were produced under severe constraints. The New Order regime was notorious for its systemic surveillance, censorship, and violence against dissidents. Lee's interlocutors recall how student activists were regularly subjected to intimidation, imprisonment, torture, and forced disappearances. Scholars such as Robinson (2018)^[7] and (Roosa, 2006)^[8] have chronicled the brutality of the Suharto era, particularly in the context of the anti-communist purges of the 1960s and the militarization of political life in the decades that followed. Lee adds a critical layer to this literature by documenting how students responded not only with direct protest, but with the creation of a symbolic infrastructure,

poems, posters, recorded testimonies, that outlived the demonstrations themselves and now serve as grassroots historiographies of resistance (Lee, 2016, pp. 91-93)^[5].

The concept of *pemuda fever*, which Lee develops in chapter two, captures the intergenerational legacy and emotional intensity of youth mobilizations. Borrowing from affect theory and Indonesian political lexicon, she defines *pemuda fever* as a condition of passionate and often idealistic engagement in social transformation, which leaves enduring emotional imprints on the political consciousness of those involved (Lee, 2016, p. 10)^[5]. This term not only honors the memory of the Generation 98 (*Angkatan 98*) but also contextualizes their ongoing involvement in post-authoritarian state-building efforts, including work in civil society organizations, public advocacy, and parliamentary politics.

Moreover, Lee addresses the post-Reformasi transformation of these activists into "middle-aged professionals" embedded in Indonesia's contemporary political and bureaucratic apparatus. This trajectory, she argues, reflects both the success and co-optation of youth movements: while their efforts dismantled Suharto's regime, their institutional incorporation often diluted the radical edge of their earlier activism (Lee, 2016, pp. 197-198)^[5]. This ambivalence resonates with work by scholars such as Aspinall (2003)^[2] and (2005)^[3], who document the "normalization" of protest movements into electoral politics in post-Suharto Indonesia. In subsequent chapters, Lee turns her attention to the role of cultural production in activism. Chapter six, for instance, analyzes the politicization of fashion, street music, and independent film as mediums of dissent. These cultural forms, while often dismissed as apolitical or youth subcultures, are shown to be deeply enmeshed in historical storytelling and political critique (Lee, 2016, p. 162)^[5]. Here, Lee's work aligns with scholars like Heryanto (2008)^[4], who has written extensively on pop culture and political satire in Indonesia, and Strasser (2010)^[10], who explores the intersections of photography, visuality, and modernity in Javanese activism.

A critical dimension of *Activist Archives* is its attention to the transnational dimensions of Indonesian youth activism. Lee identifies how Indonesian students were inspired by and engaged with global protest movements, drawing parallels with anti-globalization protests, feminist movements, and digital human rights campaigns (Lee, 2016, pp. 258-273). This international orientation resonates with Tsing (2005) argument that "global connections" do not erase the local but rather are articulated in grounded and culturally specific ways. Activists in Lee's study harnessed global discourses while still operating through localized networks of kinship, religion, ethnicity, and neighborhood.

Lee concludes her book by reflecting on the enduring power of archives to generate new political imaginaries. Even in fragmented and digitized forms, these activist records continue to circulate among younger generations, offering inspiration and frameworks for interpreting present-day challenges. In this sense, the book is not only a history of past resistance but a manifesto for remembering as political action. In her own words, archives are "places where affect meets history, where youth cultures of protest become lasting forms of political engagement" (Lee, 2016, p. 297).

Analysis and Evaluation

The book *Activist Archives: Youth Culture and the Political Past in Indonesia* by Doreen Lee offers a comprehensive

analysis of youth activism in Indonesia, particularly during the New Order and post-Suharto eras. It highlights the critical role of university students and youth networks in resisting authoritarianism, creating informal archives, and shaping democratic discourse. The book addresses key issues such as memory politics, repression, intergenerational activism, and the role of culture and media in political mobilization. Through ethnographic case studies, interviews, and field observations, Lee emphasizes the ongoing impact of youth-led movements on Indonesia's political history and contemporary public life. Despite Indonesia's complex political context, consistent themes across the book include the power of unofficial archives, the resilience of youth agency, and the significance of cultural expressions in sustaining long-term political engagement.

The book explores themes of political resistance, youth empowerment, authoritarian repression, cultural memory, and the politics of informal archiving. Lee highlights how activist archives, including zines, graffiti, underground publications, and oral histories, serve both as instruments of protest and as repositories of memory. The style is ethnographic and interdisciplinary, blending political anthropology with cultural studies and oral history. Lee's narrative is analytical and reflective, combining theoretical insight with personal fieldwork experiences to present a nuanced and accessible account of youth activism in Indonesia.

The book contributes significantly to Southeast Asian studies, political sociology, and memory studies by examining how non-institutional forms of documentation can influence national narratives and democratic transitions. It provides valuable insights into the dynamics of post-authoritarian societies and the ways in which cultural and political memory is preserved and transmitted. The concept of "activist archives" offers a new lens for understanding resistance movements, demonstrating that activism is not only about immediate protest but also about long-term cultural production, emotional labor, and intergenerational storytelling. This makes the book a useful resource for scholars, students, and practitioners interested in political activism, youth movements, and historical memory.

The book is well-structured, with chapters that follow a logical progression from the historical context of the Suharto regime to the Reformasi movement and beyond. Each chapter builds on the previous one while introducing new dimensions of youth activism, such as digital media, cultural performance, and transnational solidarity. The inclusion of personal interviews, case studies, and archival materials enhances the book's depth and credibility. The consistent integration of theoretical frameworks with empirical evidence ensures a coherent and comprehensive narrative throughout the text, allowing readers to clearly trace the development of youth activism in Indonesia.

Personal Reflection

Reading *Activist Archives* has significantly broadened my understanding of youth-led political resistance and the role of cultural memory in shaping democratic transformation. Doreen Lee's exploration of "pemuda fever", the passionate and enduring spirit of youth activism, resonates deeply with ongoing political struggles across Southeast Asia. The idea that informal archives, such as protest posters, underground zines, and digital messages, can serve as powerful instruments of memory and resistance is particularly meaningful in today's context of rapid technological change

and increasing authoritarianism in the region.

The book's discussion of how former activists transitioned into roles within public institutions is especially relevant when reflecting on young generation's own political evolution. It raises important questions about how youth movements can sustain their values while navigating formal political systems. Furthermore, the use of digital platforms to preserve activist histories aligns closely with contemporary efforts to document political events and social movements through online media in regions. This reflection has encouraged me to reconsider the importance of archiving everyday acts of dissent and to explore how similar practices might inform youth activism and historical memory in my own national context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Activist Archives: Youth Culture and the Political Past in Indonesia* offers a compelling and insightful examination of the intersection between youth activism, political memory, and cultural resistance. Doreen Lee's ethnographic research and theoretical innovation provide a rich and accessible account of how unofficial archives have played a central role in challenging authoritarian rule and shaping Indonesia's democratic aspirations. The book serves as an important resource for scholars, students, and activists seeking to understand the long-term impact of youth movements and the cultural practices that sustain them. By highlighting both the emotional and political dimensions of activism, *Activist Archives* not only documents the legacy of Indonesia's Generation 98 but also offers critical lessons for future generations seeking to engage with their own histories of resistance and reform.

Keywords and Definitions

- **Youth Activism:** The efforts and movements led by young people to bring about political or social change.
- **Indonesia:** A Southeast Asian nation composed of thousands of islands, with a complex political history and vibrant civil society.
- **Suharto:** Indonesia's authoritarian president from 1967 to 1998, whose regime was marked by repression and economic development.
- **Reformasi:** The reform movement in Indonesia that began in the late 1990s, leading to Suharto's resignation and democratic transition.
- **Political Memory:** The collective remembrance and interpretation of past political events, especially as they shape identity and future action.
- **Archives:** Collections of historical documents and records used to preserve memory and inform future generations.
- **Southeast Asian Studies:** An academic field focusing on the societies, politics, and cultures of Southeast Asia.

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