Situated Testimonies: Dread and Enchantment in an Indonesian Literary Archive


Dread and enchantment haunt twentieth-century Dutch Indies and Indonesian literature, but Laurie Sears suggests that these literary works can bring ineffable experiences of trauma into narrative form. Sears sees certain literary works as situated testimonies, and they offer a method of reading the traces that elude archival constructions—emotional traces which historians may fail to record or witness. Sears's use of Donna Haraway's notion of “situatedness” reiterates the idea that all of us speak from somewhere. Testimony, especially eyewitness testimony, is a gold standard in historical methodology. The authors of literary works are eyewitnesses of their time, but literary works are first of all written as literature. Literary or formal aspects cannot be ignored in the attempt to unravel the secrets and mysteries of the past. Those literary works that become situated testimonies can take their place in historical archives. As shown by various scholars, political factors influence processes of shaping and preserving archival materials, and Sears looks at Indies and Indonesian archival constructions under colonial conditions and in the face of postcolonial state repression. Indonesia's famous author Pramoedya Ananta Toer knew how colonial and postcolonial literary works influenced the way the past has been narrated in Indonesian archives. This way of reading follows French psychoanalyst and philosopher Jean Laplanche's retranslation of Nachträglichkeit as “afterwardsness,” where memories, like literature, can move us back and forth in time. In her research on 20th century literary archives, Sears found psychoanalytic theory moving back and forth between Europe and the Indies/Indonesia throughout the 20th century and beyond. She concludes that far from being a Jewish or European discourse, psychoanalysis is a transnational discourse of desire that has influenced Indies and Indonesian writers for over a century. These ideas inspire Sears's thinking about historical archives, literature, and trauma. The cover of *Situated Testimonies* features a photograph of Soekarno, Indonesia's first president and nationalist leader from 1925-1965.