

C. W. Watson. *Of Self and Injustice: Autobiography and Repression in Modern Indonesia*. Leiden: KITLV, 2006. 237 pp.

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The memoirs and collected oral histories of the Soeharto regime's many victims have too often been read as naïve reconstructions of past events, retold from an under-theorized viewpoint-of-the-oppressed, and bearing—quite naturally—problematic relations to disciplinary historical knowledge. The contradiction between what presents itself as a universal category of “the oppressed” and the ostensibly individualistic categories of personal experience encourages readings that alternate between a politically flaccid empathy on the one hand and opportunistic mining of historical forensics on the other.

The problem does not lie entirely in inattentive readings, since the generic limitations of these works seem at least partly to blame; memoir is a genre that more than any other lures its readers into a false sense of unfettered access to authorial intention. In most instances, it is quite difficult not to read self-writing as the record of an author defending past deeds, heroically righting historical records, or poignantly working through the consequences of trauma. Perhaps it is this very sense of authorial motivation that accounts for memoir's only half-hearted acceptance into the category of literature at all. Much like the self-consciously political works of the literary left published prior to Soeharto's ascension, there is something altogether too purposeful about autobiography. Unlike “proper” literary works that seem to shape imagination into altogether new worlds—their relations to *our* world forever perceived but equally obscured—the memoir's referent forces itself upon us like a poor relative reminding us of a less than illustrious past.

Disciplinary history has its own difficulties in relating to memoir. Written too long after the events described, too subjectively, and, of course, too interestedly, the memoir is most often treated as supplementary to mainstream history, or as firsthand testimony employed to undermine the accepted account's veracity. Few have attempted to stake a claim to the authority of history in the name of memoir-based research. Yet the use of oral testimony simply to destabilize established historical understandings leads to further difficulties, as can be glimpsed in the debates current among politically conscious Indonesia scholars over the slogan *meluruskan sejarah* (to straighten out history). Can retrospective first-person narration truly come to the aid of an historical record made crooked? Or is the very notion of a straightened universal history just one component of authoritarian ideology? Perhaps the project of historical pluralism serves primarily to undermine confidence in the project of historical knowledge writ large—resulting in an ultimately naïve cynicism toward all systematic attempts at reconstructing past events. In either case, memory's encounter with disciplinary history seems to end in epistemological absurdity.

These are the contradictions into which C. W. Watson's latest volume, *Of Self and Injustice*, quite knowingly wades. In this follow-up to his very helpful *Of Self and Nation* (2000), Watson presents us with eight chapters, each dedicated to a single work of self-writing chosen from among a cross-section of the New Order's victims. The memoirs

themselves are divided into those of formerly Communist political prisoners and exiles (Hasan Raid and H. Achmadi Moestahal, both noted "Muslim Communists"; Sudjinah, a *Gerwani* [leftist women's movement] activist; and Utuy Tatang Sontani, leftist playwright, author, and polemicist) and Muslim dissidents (A. M. Fatwa and Deliar Noer). A third category comprises edited volumes by younger activists, specifically the collections *Pendidikan Hati* (Education of the Heart) and *Kultur Hibrida* (Hybrid Culture), the former by educational and social activists, the latter by a new generation of Nadatuhl Ulama workers.

Watson provides an important service simply in presenting these works, along with commentary and relevant historical background, to an English-language readership. While it is impossible to define a representative sample of the New Order's victims, Watson does quite well to include memoirs written by female and male authors of various ages and ideological backgrounds. Watson has also taken some pains in ensuring the book's accessibility to lay readers. The introduction includes a well-paced summary of post-independence Indonesian political history, and important historical details are glossed in each of the subsequent chapters. An Indonesian-studies novice will certainly come away from the book with a workable understanding of New Order politics, while Indonesia specialists will no doubt benefit from greater familiarity with the past decade's important works of self-writing.

As for the interpretive task to which Watson sets himself, the results here can be somewhat less satisfying than the autobiographical writings themselves. Watson is very much aware of the disciplinary problems attendant to reading autobiographical material—he begins the book by noting that, too often, "the tone, tenor, and temperament of individual autobiographical voices and the subtle meanings and interpretations which they can convey are simply not recognized" (p. 3). He goes on to express his intention of reading these memoirs as acts of language, literature, and rhetoric, so as to construct a "synoptic analysis" (p. 7) of the "structures of feeling" (p. 5) at work in the texts, and in the secret histories of the New Order period at large. Such a strategy is clearly to be admired, as an attentive reading of voice and rhetorical address promises a means by which to apprehend a memoirist's understanding of herself, her public, and the uses of writing in constructing both. Such attentiveness allows us to take memoir seriously as an act of literary creation, while still thinking "synoptically" of the options available to dissidents, now making sense of their own lives, oppressed by a State in which they may once have invested their own revolutionary imaginations.

Unfortunately, Watson rarely completes this analytical work as announced. In his discussion of Achmadi Moestahal's *Dari Gontor ke Pulau Buru* (From Gontor to Buru Island) for example, he points out the oddity of the author's devoting an entire chapter to Soekarno, along with the highly "stream-of-consciousness" style and historically inaccurate narration the chapter contains. Watson dismisses all of these "problems" as resulting from poor writing, yet the difficulty of dealing with Soekarno's legacy is not one that Moestahal faces alone—it has been a major source of tension for both the Soeharto and post-Soeharto regimes, not to mention for concerned historians as well as for the very victims of the 1965–66 massacres Soekarno failed to prevent. If Moestahal devotes a great deal of space to such a tangled legacy and fails, then the failure is by no means his own, since it is a highly conspicuous symptom of the history he has lived

through and now seeks to communicate. The challenge to the sensitive reader is not merely to note that failure, but to consider its causes and unique forms of expression within a particular historical conjuncture. Easy dismissals of poor writing are abundant in Watson's analysis, and while we need not herald all victims' memoirs as important literary works, they deserve serious analysis nonetheless for what they are able to do under just what sorts of rhetorical constraint.

*Of Self and Injustice* provides a compelling account of New Order political history as experienced by those who suffered its cruelty, and it should now serve as an important reminder of how autobiographical writing may come to the aid of historians attempting to comprehend that era anew. The memoirists of Soeharto's long reign continue to invest painful memories with meaning, and thus fashion their individual experiences into some version of truth communicable to all. It will take many, many more sensitive readings of this material before we have finished learning its lessons.