This book is an ethnography about the lives of “young people ... mostly university students” (p. ix) in Jakarta, Indonesia during the first decade of the 21st Century. The book recounts how this collectively identified subject transforms through the event of 21 May 1998, when the then-president Soeharto resigned, ending his 30-plus year reign.

The period of field work (2003–2009) and the archival referents used in the study overlap but are not strictly coextensive; much of the written material used in the book precedes May 1998 and the subsequent Reformasi (Reformation) era. The work demonstrates how this period forms a rift within the history of Indonesian sovereignty. The simultaneous withdrawal of the New Order and return of Indonesian democratic elections converge asymmetrically.

One of the Indonesian names for the ostensible collective subject of the ethnography is pemuda. The term, as Lee details in the useful Introduction, is widely and perfidiously translated as “youth”, for pemuda references the Sumpah Pemuda (literally: Youth Pledge) of 1928. This pledge of Indonesian sovereignty preceded independence from the Dutch colonial authority and, therefore, contributes to the notion of pemuda as an “intervention” (p. 12) on the action of Indonesian sovereignty.

The book will be of interest to anthropologists and sociologists seeking an account of how an urban political formation—one composed as an internal opposition to the reigning government—transforms when part of its very raison d’être—the reigning national political authority—withdraws. Lee’s account details how these novel political conditions altered the lived practices (the ideas, the formation and division of labour and work, the built and phenomenological architectures, etc.) of this generation.

The work focuses on how this transformation can be recognised in archived discourse and speech. In this way, the book joins work with whom it dialogues, namely Karen Strassler’s Refractive Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java, in identifying the political import vested in practices of “documentation” in metropolitan Indonesia. The practices of archiving, which flourished in activist communities, are opposed by the dossiers that state prosecutors compiled when charging activists with political crimes. Lee here disturbs the facile moralising binary of activists versus the state, by showing how many attributes of the military authority of the New Order were also incorporated by activist communities.
For instance, writing activists practised forms of secrecy. Political meeting minutes concluded with ‘this transcript must be burnt’ (p. 44). These statements reference a social formation in which writing was a means to obtain authority, towards the end of practical and political action. Yet, as one informant pithily put it, “May changed everything” (p. 121). As the sovereign power of Indonesia underwent a metamorphosis, so too did the relation of politics and activism.

The book contributes to the ongoing, flourishing genre of ethnographies of archive. The notion of the archive pursued here follows the discursive and historicist problematic of Michel Foucault, more than the psychoanalytic or deconstructive formulations of Jacques Derrida. Heteromorphic diegesis and discourse (personal diaries, political meeting minutes, defendant’s self-defense pleas, poetry, aphoristic cartoons) provide the basis for this analysis. The book, however, does not pursue the opposed notion of archive put forth by Derrida—that the archive is marked also by the ejection and destruction of particular discursive remainders.

Lee’s work instead dramatises the amphibolous power of the inner temporal gap within writing. Despite using all of the emergency powers of externalisation at its disposal, the afterlife of writing cannot be exclusively controlled through the act of creation. One of the most extraordinary examples of this unclasped power is given over by a picture of a piece of paper with the words of the poet Wiji Thukul. Written in November 1997, it is encountered by Lee in an archive in the Netherlands. The poem begins with, “The time (that) I became a political fugitive ...,” and ends with, “Do you still need allegories / To say: I AM NOT FREE” (p. 48). In questioning the necessity of the poetic function of phatic language, and answering his own query affirmatively, the verse, and the book more broadly, forms an image for how writing and sovereign power form a dual composition of possibility and im/potence.

Lee details two discrete and important genres of writing that flourished as activists were imprisoned for political crimes: the exception (eksepsi) and the plea (pledoi). Of interest to the students of Giorgio Agamben will be how Lee brings to the attention of the reader that the “exception” sequentially precedes the “plea”, thus confirming the logic of the categories of sovereignty that Agamben has put forth as the distinctly modern one.

The book does a real service for scholars through engaging and presenting—often in long, unbroken tracts of text—these activist writings, for they reference something inalienable and untranslatable regarding the New Order’s notion of the exception of sovereignty. The book therefore contributes to understanding the archive as both a subject in as well as an object of social science inquiry. One of the key informants in the book said to a gathering in