A Certain Age
Mrazek, Rudolf

Published by Duke University Press

Mrazek, Rudolf.
A Certain Age: Colonial Jakarta through the Memories of Its Intellectuals.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64010

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2276525
THE FACULTY AT THE OPENING OF THE LAW COLLEGE IN BATAVIA-JAKARTA, 1924.

THE LECTURER IN WHITE, BACK ON THE RIGHT, DR. JACOB KATS, TAUGHT JAVANESE TO THE JAVANESE. KONINKLIJK INSTITUUT VOOR TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE, LEIDEN
POSTSCRIPT

SOMETIMES VOICES

Hearing . . . implies an opening toward a sense which is undecidable, precarious, elusive, and which sticks to the voice.
—Mladen Dolar, A Voice and Nothing More

HEARING IMPLIES AN OPENING

Already a long time ago now, when I worked, for instance, on the history of the Indonesian military, on Indonesian technical thinking, or on a biography of the first prime minister of independent Indonesia, the documents I read, statistics as much as diaries, sometimes shifted as if uncomfortable and occasionally giggled as I tried to make some sense of them. The idea to interview elderly Indonesians about their early years came to me legitimately; I believed that the people would tell me about Dutch late colonialism as they remembered it amid their postrevolutionary and postcolonial present. A premonition of a giggle might have been hidden in the idea already. Otherwise this would be again a search merely for words—words, words, words.

Noise hit me unexpectedly. Very often I could get no words at all. “Sometimes a thousand twanging instruments will hum about mine ears; and [only] sometimes voices.”

It was a tropical noise, first of all, of course. There is a good deal of man-made shade and darkness when it comes to intimacy in Jakarta, but doors and windows are rarely closed. Most of life takes place on the street, on the outside, in a space that is open, like on the porches, where also most of my interviews took place. There is shouting and cries of the people all over my
tapes, of children especially, the chirping of birds, from the sharp and aggressive to the most sublime of the caged songbirds put out high on the poles every morning, above the street in front of the house. And, of course, the wailing and sirens of the mosquitoes as the sun went down. Even the palm-tree leaves rattled surprisingly dry, loud, as I tried to listen—to words.

There was, I found out soon, an equally strong postcolonial noise. The drone of traffic, close to the house, almost with us when we sat on the front porch, often deafened everything. The noise of military vehicles seemed most insistent, as these were the last years of a very bad and persistent Indonesian military regime. On several of my tapes from 1997 and 1998, the noise of riots can be heard. There are shouts of crowds on the tapes, the thumping of bare feet and of heavy boots on the pavement, the tinkle of broken glass, and again the drone of the military cars. This, too—or so it seemed to me for a long time—made the tapes, as a source for history writing, incomprehensible.

There is an ancient Greek story: “A man plucked a nightingale and, finding but little to eat, said: ‘You are just a voice and nothing more.’” My initial feelings as a historian were certainly not how tiny a voice might be. There was no escaping it: the noise was as insistent as the word. My “nightingale” was roaring.

* * *

There was, moreover, no word without a noise. The noise, I soon realized, had been inside each word and, only thus, as a part of the noise, the voice (and the words) might really be heard. Voices were made both powerful and weak by the noise they contained.

I met Professor Resink not long before he died. He was in his early eighties at the time. He was born in Java of Dutch parents, but with much Javanese blood in his veins, as he proudly said. His ancestors had lived in Java for two centuries. Professor Resink was legally blind; it was dark in the room where we talked, so that I could barely see the old man’s face and hands. I just could hear his voice. There was no noise except a little buzz of a single fly, or so it seemed.

Sociophoneticians calls it the “Lombard effect” when, in a voice speaking under and against a background of noise, diction gets excessively distinct. The voice is bent by the noise, and the way it bends echoes the ways of the noise. The voices that struggle the most under and against the noise might be the most appealing.
Actually, there was a noise in Professor Resink’s room. The voice of the man bent against the noise—toward a fear of accent among other things. Han Resink (he permitted me to call him Han late that afternoon) told me about his childhood in Yogyakarta, the seat of one of the few surviving princely courts in Java. It was very early in the twentieth century, still decades before the end of the Dutch rule over the colony. Han’s mother was a well-known collector of Javanese antiques. Javanese and Dutch teachers were paid to give him and his little older sister lessons in Javanese gamelan, as well as in piano. Special care was taken (and here the emphasis came) that he and his sister were not let out to play on the street. Not because of the Dutch or the Javanese children, but because of the Indos, the Eurasians (like Han Resink in a way) of mixed Dutch and Indonesian parentage.

It was not one language standing against the other that was the issue, not Javanese against Dutch, but the chattering, the noise in between the languages, the argot, the impurity of words and the accents, often coming from both and many other languages and dialects that might leak into how the Resinks’ children spoke.

Professor Resink’s father was a middle-rank colonial official, and, as was the custom, at one point of his service, as mentioned above, he was paid an extended several-month leave to Europe. It was in 1922, and Mr. Resink Sr. took his children with him. Did Han have big problems, suddenly, for the first time, coming to Europe, from the heart of Java? Not at all, he told me with a smile. The only awkward thing really happened—he was about twelve at the time—when he somehow got onto a street in Amsterdam, near where they were staying, where he met some lower-class Dutch children. “Pfee, the way those children spoke!” And here the emphasis, the noise and the bending come: “We were taught to speak Dutch Dutch,” Han Resink tells me, raising a voice as if he had to—in that quiet room—against the noise, in the most careful, distinct, and flawless Indonesian.

Professor Resink had studied at the only college law school in the Dutch colony. He had a successful career, and, after 1945, when it came to the open anticolonial struggle, he was one of the very few Dutch who chose to stay with the Indonesian Republic. He applied for Indonesian citizenship and taught in Jakarta until his retirement.

He recalled to me how he and his Javanese schoolmates at the colonial law school took their Javanese lessons from one Dr. Kats. “Was not it awkward?” I asked, “a Dutchman teaching the Javanese their own language?”
“Why should it be awkward?” Han Resink replied; “Dr. Kats knew so much about the Javanese culture. And he was such a good man.”

Sociophonetics also distinguishes a “motherese” way of speaking, or IDS, infant deficiency speech. A mother, or another “good person of authority,” in an effort to communicate with the infant in her or his care, and to keep (what the authority understands as) chaos away, speaks with a hyperclear, artful, and artificially exaggerated pronunciation even in the case when the words thus pronounced might appear senseless to a non-IDS language listener (and to the infant, too)—not as words at all. Like the Javanese of Dr. Kats to his Javanese students, motherese, naturally and soundly, always has to be victorious. There is always enough will to teach, to learn, and to grow up—enough for victory.

As I listened to Han Resink later on the tape—talking to me about his life, about music, poetry, history, and most emphatically about his staying with the revolution, with the Indonesians—in the grammar and vocabulary, but most clearly of all in his voice, its timbre, the audible fantasy of accentlessness in it, the ultraclear and ex cathedra spectacularity—I could hear Dr. Kats distinctly, in a fetal position, close to Han Resink’s heart and his vocal cords. Here, there he still was, forty years after colonialism, the good and knowledgeable Dr. Kats, the source and the fruit of the graceful and courageous old Professor Resink’s coming out of silence.

The power, the noise, and the voice of Dr. Kats might in fact be more securely there, deep in Professor Resink and in many like him, because Dr. Kats’s physical being was gone. In the “quiet” room in the center of the postcolonial metropolis, in the old man’s manner of speaking, his breathing, coughing, and pausing, there it was, Dr. Kats’s “acousmatic” (that “which we hear without seeing what is causing it”)—something much more difficult to grasp, file, and dispel than a speaker carnate. Like many of the old people whom I interviewed in Indonesia, Han Resink, when speaking and pausing, struggled intensely and valiantly against the noise of the colonial and the postcolonial. At the same time and through the same struggle, he was producing and reproducing what Adorno (too easily) has called the “jargon of identity”: “The jargon channels engagement into firm institutions and, furthermore, strengthens the most subaltern speakers in their self-esteem; they are already something because someone speaks from within them, even when that someone is not at all.”

Postscript

238
Some of my most lasting experiences came at moments of a voice’s or a noise’s interruptions.

One of the most memorable and most quoted instances of the interruption of speech in Western history is the hiccups Aristophanes was suddenly “seized by” when it was his turn among philosophers to speak in praise of love. I have a case comparable to this symposium event on my tapes. One day in Jakarta I talked to a young Indonesian woman, a daughter of Sutan Sjahrir, the first Indonesian prime minister. Her father fell out of favor in the early 1960s and was put in prison by President Sukarno. After Sjahrir suffered a stroke in prison, Sukarno allowed him to go into exile in Switzerland.

Sjahrir was still alive, in the last month of his life, in Zurich, when Sukarno was overthrown at the turn of 1965 and 1966, and there is an ongoing debate in Indonesia about what Sjahrir might have thought about it all. It is a debate fueled and indeed made into a political force by the fact that Sjahrir, after yet another stroke, could not speak anymore. His daughter conveyed the power to me. She was five years old at the time: she stayed with her father, and she used to tell him fairy tales. She said that he liked them. “How come,” I asked, “he could not speak anymore?” “But he could cry,” she explained.9

We should take the child as seriously as we should the hiccups, the babblings, and the cries. Let me quote this from Jean-Luc Nancy once more:

When a voice, or music, is suddenly interrupted, one hears . . . the voice or the music of its own interruption.10

When speech interrupts itself, it may happen that “myth stops playing,” and we get a rare chance to hear the voice and the community, too, “in a certain way”: “When myth stops playing, the community that resists completion and fusion . . . makes itself heard in a certain way.”11

The loudest interruption of speech I have heard in Indonesia came when the talking got close to the people missing after September 1965. The people arrested or killed, in the bloodiest massacres in modern Indonesian history, as suspected left-wing opponents of the regime— even those who were released after years but still under control, or had resigned, or had been destroyed—they were to be avoided. They had belonged to the brightest and most exciting people of modern Indonesia, and many of them had been the best friends of the people I was now talking to. Often, they reveal themselves (and history “in a certain way”) in a ghostly way, through a click and then a white noise on my tape.
Merely to listen to the old people, and then to the tapes, the poetics of the sound was good enough. I would find it justifiable to convey just this experience. Yet what is the poetics beyond the pleasure of just being there and listening? Aren’t the voices and the noise just self-evident, like the colors?

We might ask: who would learn from this? Can someone teach me that I see a tree? In the perhaps most famous scream of the modern West, in Edward Munch’s painting from 1893, there might be an opening to an Indonesian answer. There is, in the painting, a human, almost human, head with a mouth gaping: in a scream. The scream, clearly, is coming out of the screaming, tortured body. But there is something more in the painting, and in its sound: “Many interpreters (including Munch himself) have seen the distorted landscape in the background as the effect of the scream spreading through nature.”

This is a powerful idea in this painting and beyond it: a scream (or hiccups, babble, cry, or breathing), a voice, or noise can produce landscape, and they do so by expanding intimacy. There is a poetic, real, and never to be doubted sense of intimacy, and thus of the local, in a voice. Voices are produced in bodies that resonate — “it is precisely the voice that holds bodies and languages together.” Voices, as rarely anything else, are truly intimate and “extimate.” Being emitted, voices also hold bodies and the social together — “this resolutely and irreducibly singular (mortal) voice, in common.”

There was another moment in my interview with Professor Resink that remains with me especially strongly. He was still telling me about the extended leave of his father when he as a boy traveled with him. They passed the Suez Canal, and “the East” (the all-white flannels of the colonial officials, those kinds of skies, of smells, of birds, he explained) still stuck with them. But it slowly fell away from them. On the second night after the Suez, as their ship sailed in the Mediterranean, the captain invited his father and him on de brug, the bridge of the ship. It was dark, deep in the night, only the stars and far to the north, lower on the horizon, a few tiny lights flickered. “All of a sudden,” Professor Resink told me, “my father said, looking to the little lights: ‘This is Europe, my boy!’”

It is still there, in my memory as much as on my tape, the trembling voice, and indeed the tears, the father, who is long not anywhere anymore except
in that voice, and, yes, the historical landscape. The Resinks’ family history in Indonesia reached back to the eighteenth century; rather few of Han Resink’s ancestors had ever actually seen Europe, yet Europe in the colony of theirs was present—the longing, the drifting, throughout and hugely, the moisture getting into everything, the salty moisture of the sea around the ship, the tears in Professor Resink’s voice, his voice most inexhaustibly, as he was telling me about that close-to-midnight south-of-Messina.

Listening to Professor Resink’s voice (and the breathing and coughing that went with it) one knows, at least for the moment, that “people are silhouettes that are both imprecise and singularized, faint outlines of voices.”

The social, then, also appears not merely to be signified but, indeed, produced by a voice as it is placed into or against the noise. Origins and, therefore, communities are built like that, around the voice, and in the manner of the voice: “He speaks of an origin . . . it is we who stand at the furthermost extreme and who barely hear him from this limit. Everything is a matter of one’s practical, ethical, political—and why not add spiritual?—positioning around this singular eruption of voice.”

Hearing the old people in Indonesia, at the end of the military regime and long after the failed revolution, at the end of their own lives, trying to place their voices into and against the noise, I knew that, through their speaking, coughing, breathing, falling silent, they were gathering the world—in postcolonial Jakarta as in Nancy’s Inoperative Community, as in Walter Benjamin’s storyteller, and indeed as in the precolonial hikayat, histories, lore of voice that many of the people I had talked to knew well:

And the ruler came and sat down on the doorstep, pages paid homage to him. And also Hang Jebat came in and paid homage, and the ruler ordered him to read a tale because Jebat knew how to present a variety of voices, moreover those voices were very good. And Hang Jebat presented a tale, loud was his voice, and melodious too. And all the girl attendants and ladies in waiting and concubines of the ruler, they all sat down, and behind the screens they peeped at Hang Jebat. . . . Everybody who heard (Hang Jebat’s voice) felt love. And the ruler slumbered on the lap of Hang Jebat.

When I asked Mrs. Sosro, over ninety when I met her in 1992, why she had been talking to me so warmly, why she told me so many intimate and beautiful details about her life and about everything, she said that only rarely
did anyone come to listen anymore. Her children and grandchildren were
gone and almost all of her friends were dead: that was why I got so close to
the center of her space, because it had shrunk. This was why I was privileged
to hear her less faintly and, as a special bonus, to learn more about a histo-
rian’s place in all this.

Sitor Situmorang is a poet who spent many years in the prisons of the
military regime after the tragic events of 1965. He was released and went into
many more years of exile. In the summer of 1997, in the trendy postcolonial
Jakarta Café Cemara, I witnessed, heard, his homecoming. All chairs and
tables in the café had been moved to the walls for the occasion, and we—
quite a fashionable crowd—were sitting on the floor, squeezed against each
other. Poets, like painters, seem to know best about space as well as voice.
We expected a poem. Sitor stood up in the middle of the crowd and, after
waiting for a while, said: “Revolution,” in an ordinary, flat, everyday voice.
Then, he said “No!” a little bit more loudly, and then again and again, “No!”
and “NO!!!” and “NO!!!!!!” in an increasing volume, until he shrieked, red in
face with the veins in his throat swelling. People were taken aback, straight-
ened up, as if leaning a little away from him. There was a silence, awkward,
dead, long, and increasingly senseless. We lost him. Then, in a whisper,
tiredly, almost inaudibly (did he still want us to hear?), he said: “yes.”

Because voice is intimate and estimate, corporeal and incorporeal, making
the body and the social by making them resonate, as much as anything, the
voice can tell us how the body and the social in common are political.

I have not seen the particular performance by a new-generation Indo-
nesian artist, painter, dancer, and political activist, Ms. Arahmaiani, but my
son has, and he told me about it. It took place in the main auditorium of
the National Gallery in Singapore, late in 2004. It was Sunday, and people
came in from the street to visit the gallery as a part of their Sunday routine.
In the colonial grand hall, on the stage made of benches arranged around
her in a square, Arahmaiani began by handing out copies of the previous
day’s Singapore newspapers and by asking the people to choose at random
and to read aloud a headline or a line from a column, an advertisement, a
market report, a political news bit, or a sports score. The Sunday crowd felt
ill at ease, at first, then a few of them mumbled something. Only slowly, and
not altogether amicably, they read, and louder, until a few, and then most,
and all of them really shouted. In the noise, trying to place her body into it,
Arahmaiani danced.

Arahmaiani dancing into the noise struggles to make a space (“practical,
ethical, political—and why not add spiritual?”) for herself and for an Indonesia of hers, depressed after a series of revolutions that somehow never seem to do. What she achieves: her voice space is cracked, shrill, and threadbare at the edges. It also happened in Singapore, amid the Sunday crowd, in a sort of exile.

One could hear another voice in what Arahmaiani was doing. Two eras before her, Sukarno, the first president of the independent Indonesia, the “Great Leader of the Revolution,” had been injecting his voice into the noise of the crowd—also to build a space for his nation. But while Arahmaiani’s voice, when it can be heard at all, is wrinkled all over, Sukarno’s voice—we can still listen to many tapes of it—sounds smooth like the skin of a newborn baby. While Arahmaiani’s voice is working from the edges, Sukarno’s voice sounds as if it still is coming from the acoustical—practical, ethical, political, spiritual—center. Arahmaiani makes the world resound by the risqué exposure of her body. But no one was supposed to touch Sukarno’s—his mouth, his tongue, and, least of all, his microphone. Sukarno’s was a historical era of trust in tools and mechanics that could be tested. In his toolbox, Sukarno trusted his tongue, and he would very much agree with the ancients, what they said about the “little member,” able to “boast mightily”: “Behold, how small a fire—how great a forest kindled.”

As for the microphone, Sukarno breathed on the microphone, and concentrated and ever-widening radio waves—an extension of the tongue and microphone—mightily worked to establish a (fundamentally acoustic) nation.

The whole world today . . . turns its ears to Jakarta. . . . Here, here is the Indonesian Nation. . . . Fifty, sixty million Indonesians now turn their ears to hear what I say! . . . they gather around their radios . . . they tune their sets in . . . they swarm over the radio. . . . [Even the rebels in the jungle listen] Simbolon, Zulkifli Lubis, Hussein . . . I say to them: “My misled brothers! . . . My brothers!”

The whole world today can taste the deliciousness of our revolution. . . . It is her Universal Voice.

I am the extension of the people’s tongue; I am the voice of the people’s aspirations.

Voices and noises like Hang Jebat’s, Sitor’s, Arahmaiani’s, or Sukarno’s produce a historical space. As such, to a listening historian, they can significantly

_Sometimes Voices_
complicate the comfortable, linear, cumulative, capitalist, progressive, and proudly Western notion of time.

When Professor Resink said: “This is Europe, my boy!” his ancestors’, theirs, his (and very much my, as well) time was there, present, together, in unison, by the very force of Professor Resink’s own intellecitive and affective action, by the rhythm of his breathing.25 As the voice of Professor Resink became extimate to the other voices and noises, the instant when he said it, it became a noncontinuous event and an indivisible instant,26 extimate to the others’ moments in the past when the glimmers of Europe had appeared, or had seemed to appear.

An alternative periodization of Indonesian history may be suggested by the voices and the noise—by Sukarno’s moment and in what pitch he says “tongue” or “revolution,” by Professor Resink’s moment and with what accent he says “Europe” or “boy.” Around these moments—the signs and the building blocks of the past and of the now—moments “brilliantly present” and “totally here,”27 the logic of history may be assumed to be turning.

**WRITING IT DOWN**

In ancient Greece young people and freemen were forbidden to play the flute. A reason given was that “one cannot utter words while playing the flute.”28 One might expose oneself to the sound of music, and one might “melt and liquefy,” “till he completely dissolves away his spirit, cuts out as it were the very sinews of his soul and makes of himself a ‘feeble warrior.’”29 Many of the old people I interviewed took my breath away. That is to say that often I was on the way to “dissolving” in the old people’s voices or, as the Greeks might say, to becoming a “feeble warrior.” Yet I was there to write it down!

Their very appeal makes the voices and the noise most difficult to be “read” as documents, which they surely are. The very power a listener might try to apply in an effort to understand might cripple them beyond recognition. Documents, as Michel Foucault has pointed out, have been “always [or too often] treated as the language of a voice since reduced to silence.”30 Literature, scholarly and all the other, or so it appears, on principle and the more so the closer it comes to hearing—to be writeable—tends to invalidate a voice, a noise, and their interruptions. An author, it seems, by the very fact of being an author, does everything not to melt and liquefy: “Under an assumed silence, there is someone standing apart who indeed ought to

Postscript

244
answer for it. — Then why does he not speak directly? — Because, I imagine, he cannot: in literature there is no direct speech.”

Mr. Poncke Prinsen, another old person I met in Jakarta, became unforgettable to me by his belonging to a gray zone among noise, voice, and word, and among speaking, listening, and writing. He seemed to be of that zone fully, and the more so, the more he struggled to get out of it.

I met Mr. Prinsen in the middle of 2000. We sat on the front porch of his small house at the outer edge of Jakarta that was already almost countryside. Or, more precisely, I sat: he reclined on a folding bed, which I had helped his wife carry out of the house, because he had wished it so. Here are my notes written the same evening:

On 16 May I was seeing Poncke Prinsen. I wonder how much I can keep from this amazing interview, a meeting rather. His voice was extremely weak.

(Mr. Prinsen had recently suffered his fourth stroke.)

The first remarkable thing that comes to my mind now is how stubbornly he insisted on writing everything down as he spoke and, then, how his hand with the pencil trembled — “like his voice,” I thought. His way of life has been — and his way of talking clearly remains — that of a man of written words. Books, newspapers, loose sheets of paper were everywhere, much of it written by himself, and he was constantly demanding this or that to be brought to him, to show me; or, at least, he pointed as he spoke, even in the case when the item happened to be inside the house, where we could not see it. Evidently, he was happy on the porch, which was like most of the other porches in Jakarta I knew — a few meters from the traffic, in this case on a little neighborhood alley but also extremely busy. Clearly, too, he was fully at ease with the traffic, the scooters and children most of all, and he did not stop talking even when next to nothing of what he said could be heard amidst the noise. His wife held one or, at moments, both of his hands as we spoke, and a few times he put his hand on mine. He really had very great difficulty producing words, and often rather noises were coming out of his mouth, sometimes like a quiet snorting, other times like little cries, almost a weeping. Yet it all made a perfect sense to me (and to him) as we sat there: his message was genuine and, in this way, unquestionably coherent.

Sometimes Voices
The next morning, Mr. Prinsen sent his daughter to my hotel with an addition, she said, to what he had told me. What she brought was one rather crumpled and little smeared piece of paper. Much of his longhand on it I could decipher only with great difficulty, and some of it not at all. I believe that, where I succeeded, it was only because I was still recalling the fullness of the previous day. The scribbling of Mr. Prinsen’s hand was like the noises he made.

Listening to the old people’s stories—and they always speak in stories, of course—can also help a historian dispel the charm and curse of a narrative. The voices and noises, “brilliantly present” and “totally here,” their eruptions underneath and above the stories, and through the stories, may lead a historian closer to what Proust might have really meant by “the search of lost time”—at least Milan Kundera translated it like that: “The search of present time.”

A NOTE ON TECHNOLOGY

Mr. Prinsen came from solid Dutch stock: he was born in The Hague “to socialist parents” (so he put it), was close to the labor movement all his life, took part in the Dutch anti-Nazi resistance as a teenager during the German occupation of the Netherlands, and spent some time in a Nazi concentration camp. In 1947, he was drafted into the Dutch army and sent to the (former) colony to fight the new Indonesian republic. Several weeks after arriving in Java, Mr. Prinsen deserted from the Dutch army, one of only a handful of men who did so, and joined the other side. At the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam, possibly the largest collection of socialist movement documents in the world, a curator told me that only two archives they kept under lock and key all the time—the Karl Marx papers (the astonishing bequest by Karl Kautsky), because, of course, they were so unique and precious, and those of Poncke Prinsen—because he, the deserter from the Dutch cause, was still so hated in the Netherlands and there was still a credible threat that the institute might be broken into and the Prinsen papers destroyed.

The lock on Mr. Prinsen’s papers in the Amsterdam archives, like the tapes of my talking with him that sit here on my shelf, makes me think about the death of the voice. Mr. Prinsen passed away in 2002, but, as I listen to his voice, now, on my tape, it is at times even more moving than when he had
actually spoken. His trembling is beamed into my ear through the outlet of the machine. Mr. Prinsen’s voice is touching, as if he were on radio or television:

These means—especially radio and television—reach the people at large in such a way that they notice none of the innumerable technical intermediations; the voice of the announcer resounds in the home, as though he were present and knew each individual. The announcers’ technically and psychologically created artificial language—the model of which is the repellently confidential “Till we meet again”—is of the same stripe as the jargon of authenticity.35

There is nothing new in this authentic power of technology, and certainly nothing new in the (former) colony. I am touched by Mr. Prinsen’s voice on the tape like the Dutch in the colony used to be touched by the broadcast on their early radios—hooked to the network, touched away from the place where they actually were, away from the voices and noises of the colony that they might otherwise actually hear—becoming authentic in that other way.

One elderly Indonesian to whom I talked was a man of radio—he had been the director of the revolutionary Republican Radio in 1945.36 We talked at the time of riots, in November 1998, in Jakarta, and at one moment the voices of the crowd and the noise of the breaking glass came close indeed to the front porch where we sat. We tried to go on for a few minutes as if nothing was happening, but, at last, with a forced smile the old man motioned toward my tape recorder on the table between us and said: “Station break!” We both, in that little joke, were seduced into believing at that moment, maybe, that the riots and all that had turned sour in life and revolution, by the touch of the button, will be touched away.

There is an extensive collection, hundreds of tapes in Jakarta, in the Indonesian National Archives. Some of the interviews had been done with the same people to whom I talked, here collectively described as “the Pioneers of the Indonesian freedom.” The audio archive was put together at the moment at which the military regime was at its peak. As the philosophy of the archives put it, the interviews were to be done so that “not only you, who conducted the interview, experienced the atmosphere of the interview directly and base your knowledge on that experience, can understand the interview.” The interviews were to be “preserved for history” and be “useful
to everybody.” Therefore, in the ways in which questions were to be asked and answers recorded, there was to be “uniformity or, at least an effort at uniformity if total uniformity cannot be achieved.”

There are rows of cassettes without end in the archives (interviewers were paid by the cassette). There were prescribed questions, disciplined answers, and the ideal has almost been achieved. Usable to all, to use Adorno’s description of the jargon of authenticity again, there are on the tapes, “words that are sacred without sacred content . . . frozen emanations . . . products of the disintegration of the aura.” Chairil Anwar, the great poet of the Indonesian revolution, and a contemporary of the people in this book except that he died young, might have been, in 1943, prophesying the tapes:

Death.
Maybe it’s like this: silent, stiff, that’s all,
One day your voice may be compressed into this.

And yet, as Adorno writes, “products of the disintegration of the aura” — this, at least as related to the tapes in the Jakarta archives, allows for some optimism. There are undertones or noises on the tapes. The death, luckily, never fully happened. The badly paid people doing the oral history project in Jakarta did not seem to be able to make the voices into the thing as prescribed. Throughout, and especially at the moments at which a question went astray or the interviewee became tired, or impatient — traces of the present were left on the tape, like a voice underground, or rather a noise.

THE ZONE

People have often asked me what the Zone is, and what it symbolizes, and have put forward wild conjectures on the subject. . . . The Zone doesn’t symbolize anything . . . the zone is a zone, it’s life, and as he makes his way across it a man may break down or he may come through. Whether he comes through or not depends on his own self-respect, and his capacity to distinguish between what matters and what is merely passing.

— Andrey Tarkovsky, Sculpting in Time, on his film Stalker

On some tapes, I might sound like what Sigmund Freud introduced to our age as a “powerful silent listener.” On most other occasions there is not much subtlety either, if only because of my croaking-voice Indonesian or Dutch with a heavy Czech accent. Moreover, out of clumsiness, anxiety, or perhaps
arrogance, I seemed always to place my tape recorder (not a very sensitive machine either) close to my chest and mouth. As I listen now to the tapes, my voice, embarrassingly, is booming, and theirs, the old people’s, is weak in the background.

This is an admission I have to make for this book to come to some closure. Only occasionally did I get close to what Nancy defines as a dialogue: “Dialogue,” he says, “this articulation of speech, or rather this sharing of voices.”

Very late into the work, I learned about four Indonesians, writers, at least two generations younger than any one of the old people to whom I talked; even a few years younger than Ms. Arahmaiani, who led me to them. I never met them in person; I have only read a little book they wrote in 2004 about a theater performance they decided to do: *Waktu Batu: Teater garasi; Laboratorium penciptaan teater* (The Stone Age: Garage Theater; A Laboratory to Make Theater).

Latif, Andri Nur, Gunawan Maruanto, and Ugoran Prasad, the four, I think, have been trying something very close to my project. First, they make it clear in the book that they are only authors of sorts: the story they put to paper “was written in the stone age.” Of course, there was not much writing at that time — mostly or only voices and the noise. The only way to write it down, they found, was to write and keep talking about the writing, to stick to the work as if it were a voice (one never gives one’s voice away really); like breath. Here are some of their notes:

Writer, who writes, who puts his writing to the paper, puts himself there with it and remains there, with the writing. At some distance, but he is still there. Now he has to admit the distance, and it is best done by reading aloud what has been written: thus writing is made and made not different from reading. Then, the writer has to give his text to the actors so that the distance may increase yet a step further. The actors as they act the text are quite at a distance from the text already, and yet they still, and with the author, remain fully in the text.

What Latif, Nur, Maruanto, and Prasad accomplished through this never-ending, hesitant and against-themselves process of giving and not giving their text away — to their own voices, to the voices of actors, and finally to the voices and noise of the stage and of the audience — was to stay present

*Sometimes Voices*
and to be writers at the same time. Here are more of their notes (and, yes, they clearly knew about Lacan):

We tried to force all the abstract concepts we might be supplied with, down and deep, close to, and into the matter that one can see, hear, and touch. What we ended up with, perhaps inevitably, was a sort of schizophrenia . . . not of the clinical-psychology type, but a disposition that exists among the sick as well as the healthy, a sense one may get in a space like hallways or waiting-rooms of hospitals. . . . Hospital, in fact, seemed to be all upon us as we worked our way through and as we talked [tafsir] above the text of our “Stone Age Version One.”

(Taf s ir is commonly understood in Indonesia to mean “exegesis,” “commentary,” or, more specifically, “explanation of passages of Koran by supplying additional information.”)

As the days of the work passed one after the other, the feeling of a waiting room affected almost all the members of the artistic team. We decided to intensify the feeling even more, and a long scene had been inserted into the play, which actually was to take place in a kind of a hospital waiting room.

To keep truthful to their idea of work, this was not a stone-age–hospital waiting room, but a modern Indonesian urban establishment.

Time, in which we found ourselves, moved to a collision with itself [wajah waktu yang bertabrakan] and yet we were able to feel this as a fashion, or, to put it another way, as a bad dream. . . . The world of the waiting room . . . engulfed the team . . . and we were almost there, we almost entered into the fullness of the text. We began to feel a possibility to articulate the story in a subtle way naturally and as an event.

The spoken word can never be frozen. Even if it seems to be caught on tape, it can be heard, really, only as long as the breath of the speaker and of that who hears pull and push, as the mouths, so to speak, can be open. Flow is in the nature of both equally, speaking and hearing. Being a historian and being struck by hearing, to be within earshot, one just is not allowed to become “curious”:

Curiosity has nothing to do with observing entities and with marveling at them. To be amazed to the point of not understanding is something in which
[curiosity] has no interest. Rather it concerns itself with a kind of knowing, but just in order to have known.46

The trust in the importance of voice and noise as a source for writing history can be fruitful only if “understood as a possibility” and if it is “cultivated as a possibility.” We must not do anything but to “comport ourselves towards it.”47

Talking with my interviewees has mostly been flowing, continuous, as long as the tape ran and batteries lasted. Of course, there were the trips the old people took to the bathroom, to take medicine, or, in some cases, to take a nap. But some ruptures in the flow were like when the door in a hospital waiting room opens. There were moments when all might be lost, but they also might be the openings. This was the scary part about the zone—its limits.48 These might be moments of crashing as well as the moments, at last, to write it down.

* * *

The Garage Theater was explicitly a history project. History was described—the “Stone Age,” the time before the Dutch, the time after the Dutch, the unfinished revolution, the colonialism that seemed to be staying forever:

It happens here, at the foot of the hills, and nobody is powerful enough to take away the magic . . . the silence. It happens here: the body of a boy is about to be . . . turned in stone. It happens here: the fairy tales of childhood. . . . the boy is about to go to sleep. His mother sings a lullaby, which came from . . . the other side of the ocean: Slaap, kindje, slaap.49

“Slaap, kindje, slaap,” “Sleep, baby, sleep,” is, of course, in Dutch. The boy to be turned into stone is Kala, the Javanese god of time.

It is so very difficult to anchor anything as long as one tries to listen and even more so as one tries to write it down. Moreover, the Garage Theater people are Indonesians, they deeply care, but again and again they emphasize that none of them is from Central Java, “where it all happened,” and that they “knew nothing” about that, certainly not, when they began to write. They had no choice but with the greatest affection (and here again is a lesson I had to take most seriously) to stick to their foreignness. They make sure that the gods and the people know:

KALA: I am afraid, Mama! I am afraid I will become a stone.
— Slaap, kindje, slaap . . .

Sometimes Voices
251
KALA: Mama! I hear the Garage Theater is giving a play about us. How could they? They are not from here.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{\ldots}\textsuperscript{\ldots}\textsuperscript{\ldots}

As I sit back at home with the tapes, and as I listen, even with the buttons to stop the tape and to listen again, even with transcripts of the tapes next to the tape recorder, it still is a sort of waiting-room or schizophrenia adventure, or, at least, a dual hearing—of the sounds on the tape and in memory. The tapes now and the sounds then are paired, like a miracle and the miracle’s celebration—or, at least, not “opposed as truth and falsity.”\textsuperscript{51}

The part of my writing that I want to matter most was done in panic. These were the moments at which I had just finished an interview and walked out of the house, happy that I had done it, that I had it on my tape—and fearful of how much I had missed and was still missing with every moment that passed: “Weren’t the batteries dead again?” “Didn’t I cover the microphone with my hand again?” “How long will my memory last to keep all the details,” each of which, I knew, might be important: her eyes shifting; his eyes getting moist; the door to the back room opening a little, closing again?

In a taxi or a \textit{bajaj} pedicab, if I was lucky to get one quickly, and often still on the sidewalk, in the heat—and the noise was particularly overwhelming at these moments—I scribbled as fast as I could, with the voices still in my ear, having no time to care about grammar, punctuation, capital letters, even letters, scribbling (like Mr. Prinsen mumbled), as fast, as soft, as strong, hopefully, as they had been talking to me a minute earlier, still in and already away, in the zone, still listening—out of breath.