Living in a Time of Madness: 
Last Days of Java's Last Prophetic Poet

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Shortly before his death in December 1873, the renowned Javanese 
court poet R. Ng. Ronggawarsita composed a short work of social 
criticism and Islamic ethics that is among the most celebrated of 
Javanese literary texts. Serat Kalatidha (The Time of Darkness) 
reflects upon the avenues that remain open to the ethical subject in 
what Ronggawarsita calls the “time of madness,” the time of darkness 
and error that marked his dismal present in high colonial Java. Most 
celebrated as a prophecy, the poem is, in part, a critical reworking of 
an early nineteenth-century prophetic reflection on the Javanese past. 
My talk explores the troubled context in which the author wrote this 
twelve-stanza (108-line) poem and how its text forms both a critical 
commentary on the state of the poet’s current-day society and a 
pensive reflection on the ethical imperatives of Islam. In the course of 
this exploration, I reveal how Ronggawarsita’s poem forms a 
prophecy, not as a foretelling of an already determined future, but 
rather as a work that moves along prophetic time to provoke in his 
readers a productive intimacy with both pasts and futures.

Professor Nancy Florida is a historian of colonial and postcolonial Indonesia whose work concerns 
Javanese and Indonesian history, historiography, and literary studies; Islam in Indonesia; and mass 
vigilance and trauma. She is a professor of Javanese and Indonesian Studies at the University of Michigan, 
where she served as Director of the University’s Islamic Studies Program 2010-2012. Her most recent 
book, Javanese Literature in Surakarta Manuscripts, Vol. 3 (2012), is the third of three volumes detailing 
the contents of some 700,000 pages of Javanese manuscripts stored in three royal archives in Surakarta, 
Indonesia. Other representative publications include Writing the Past, Inscribing the Future: History as 
Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia (1996), “Writing Traditions in Colonial Java: The Question of 
Islam,” in Cultures of Scholarship (1997), “A Proliferation of Pigs: Specters of Monstrosity in 
Reformation Indonesia” (Public Culture 2008), and “Syattāriyya Sufi Scents in the Literary World of the 
Surakarta Palace in Nineteenth-Century Java,” in Buddhist and Islamic Orders in Southern Asia (2018), 
and “Living in a Time of Madness: Last Days of Java’s Last Prophetic Prophet,” forthcoming in History 
and Theory. Her current research concerns metaphysical poetry of an early nineteenth-century Sufi sage 
from the Javanese palace of Surakarta.

Wednesday, November 6
12:00 Noon
Room 203, Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue