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George Floyd in Papua: Image-Events and the Art of Resonance

Karen Strassler

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Abstract

This article offers an introduction to the “image-event” as both concept and method through a focus on the circulation of images around the killing of George Floyd. It examines how these images reverberated and resonated in West Papua, a restive region of Indonesia that has been the site of a long-standing separatist movement. It critically examines a celebratory media discourse that sees the US-based Black Lives Matter movement as expanding outward to spark similar movements elsewhere, a logic that reiterates long-standing colonialist narratives that figure places like Papua as backwaters belatedly receiving and imitatively taking up ideas that flow from the metropole outward. Questioning such assumptions, the article suggests that attention to image-events and the art of resonance can better reveal the ways that long-standing global asymmetries affect the flow of images and the course of political action.

Issue Section: [Research Articles](#)

Keywords: [image-event](#), [Indonesia](#), [photography](#), [race](#)

On July 27, 2021, a video of two Indonesian military officers roughly subduing a young Papuan man, Steven Yadohamang, at a food stall in the restive region of West Papua began to go viral.¹ A still image pulled from the video, in some cases reworked as a drawing or juxtaposed with other images and text, also began to circulate ([fig. 1](#)). It shows a man with dark brown skin facedown on the ground. One soldier straddles him, a knee in the middle of his back, while the other places a booted foot on the back of the man's head. An artist's simplified version emphasizes the difference in skin color between the officer and the man on the ground and places the figures against a backdrop of the Papuan flag with the words “Papuan Lives Matter” written across the bottom ([fig. 2](#)). The image was posted on Instagram the day after the video was recorded. It was just one of many reworked images that began to circulate on social media and the Internet.

Figure 1



Screenshot from an amateur video posted on an online news source, showing Steven Yadohamang, a deaf-mute teen, being restrained by two Indonesian military police officers. Video credit: Benar News. Posted on Yamin Kagoya, "Outrage over Indonesian Officers for Stomping on Disabled Papuan Teen's Head." Asia Pacific Report, July 29, 2021.

<https://asiapacificreport.nz/2021/07/29/outrage-over-indonesian-officers-for-stomping-on-disabled-papuan-mans-head/>

Figure 2



Artistic rendering by Toni Malakian of the video still of Yadohamang. Malakian has simplified and stylized the image, superimposed it over a map of Papua, and added the text "Papuan Lives Matter." Toni Malakian, Instagram, July 27, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRIeWurEUm/>.

The video, taken by a bystander on a cell phone, was 1:21 long. In it the officer's boot presses on the man's head for approximately twelve seconds. Pointing out the brevity of this encounter is not intended to diminish the abuse of power evident in this incident, in which the victim was a deaf-mute teenager. It is certainly not to call into question the ongoing state violence, political oppression, and systemic racism that has characterized the Indonesian presence in the West Papua region. Rather it is to suggest that the incident was not in itself a particularly unusual occurrence and pales in comparison to many other acts of violence suffered by Papuans at the hands of the Indonesian military. It was the way the video distilled violence into image that mattered.

For Papuans the sight of Steven Yadohamang being violently restrained called up in condensed visual form a long history of pain and humiliation at the hands of the Indonesian state. The image immediately resonated with Papuan *memoria passionis*, an archive of embodied memories of suffering inflected by Christian theology.² It provoked a shock of recognition, not because the act of violence it pictured was itself shocking but because of the affective force with which it allowed the past to be “seized . . . as an image.”³

But the image also mattered because of its capacity to resonate beyond that Papuan history—a potential that derived from its resemblance to the image of George Floyd with Derek Chauvin's knee on his neck. In that infamous video, Chauvin presses his knee into Floyd's neck for an excruciating nine and a half minutes, as horrified bystanders protest and Floyd cries out in pain and terror until his life is extinguished. As I will discuss in what follows, the killing of George Floyd became an “image-event,” that is, a politically consequential process in which an image and its proliferating iterations precipitate powerful and at times unpredictable affective and discursive responses. The two events in Merauke and Minneapolis are not equivalent, but they are brought into a relation of iconic resemblance through the act of selecting and circulating the still image of the officer's boot on the mute man's head ([fig. 3](#)). In this and other acts that effect resonance, Papuan and other activists in Indonesia tapped into the political potency of the George Floyd image-event.

Figure 3



Screenshot from Twitter juxtaposing George Floyd and Steven Yadohamang. The caption reads "The Army in Merauke tortures a deaf-mute person, looks just like the George Floyd case" (the word mirip used here means "to closely resemble" or "look just like")

In this article, I ask what happens if we shift our vantage point on Black Lives Matter from its presumed center in the United States. What do we see when we center the work of activists in other locations who seek racial justice and global recognition within a profoundly asymmetric media landscape and attention economy? How do they use image-events and the art of resonance to draw attention to other confrontations with state violence and systemic racism, however

geographically distant and however historically, politically, and socially distinct from that encountered by Blacks in the United States?

Making Resonant Images

The Papuan image described above allowed Papuans to make their own suffering visible and legible to others through resonance with the image of George Floyd. Floyd was already, by this point, a globally iconic figure whose image had become emblematic of a whole history of racial oppression and state violence in the United States. The video still of the deaf-mute teen and the Indonesian officers could likewise readily condense into a single powerful image the pervasive, everyday racialized violence with which people in Papua are confronted in their interactions with Indonesian authorities. Resonance put these two images—and by extension the American case and the Indonesian case—into relation. Beyond analogy, the resemblance between the two images gave the Papuan incident traction as an instance of a global phenomenon of deep systemic racism and human rights abuse rather than an isolated incident or a problem specific to Indonesia's internal politics. Coupled with the linking power of the hashtag, visual resonance enabled the Papuan image to garner attention among those who might otherwise have paid little heed but who were already primed to respond because of their exposure to other similar images.

Since the foundational work in social theory of Gabriel de Tarde on the “contagion of imitation,” the social force of repetition has been noted.⁴ Scholars working on iconic images in particular have argued that it is through their repetition, circulation, and reworking that images accrue value, affective charge, and political efficacy.⁵ Hariman and Lucaites suggest that, rather than mere reproduction, active practices of “copying, imitating, satirizing, and other forms of appropriation” are what transform images into iconic encapsulations of histories or ideals.⁶ Bishnupriya Ghosh describes the iconic image as a “recursive image dense with symbolic accretions.”⁷ As I have argued elsewhere, repetition is always more than mere reproduction, because iconic images “become repositories of their own histories. Each new mode of appearance does not cancel out an earlier form but builds upon it or takes its place alongside it,” deepening its resonant capacities.⁸

Drawing on the work of Arjun Appadurai and Michael Warner, anthropologist Brian Larkin has argued that perceived resemblance, or what he calls “commensuration,” between films made in India and local conditions and concerns in Nigeria motivates “uptake” of those films by local audiences.⁹ Larkin's goal is to move away from technologically deterministic accounts of circulation by highlighting the social and cultural factors that make some images and media products desirable to specific audiences who may be geographically, socially, and culturally distant from the source of the media. His aim is also to recognize the agency of those on the consuming end of globally circulating images: “Material infrastructures create the channels by which media move, and these are crucial to processes of circulation. But so also are semiotic, interpretive processes. . . . The power of global flows lies not merely in movement but in uptake, in [the media products'] power as a source of imaginative investment in people's lives and their remediation in other cultural forms.”¹⁰

I develop this emphasis on uptake, agency, and the labor of remediation to think about the ways that people actively generate resonant images. Whereas words like *imitation* and *repetition* can

imply automatic or derivative copying, I want to draw attention to the skills involved in actively seeking and producing effects of similarity. Like Tarde's "contagion," the epidemiological metaphor of the viral image often implies a kind of organic, unreflexive spread. This metaphor may effectively convey the impression caused by the speed with which images proliferate, circulate, and mutate, but it can obscure the active processes and visual skills that enable or produce these effects of virality. Harnessing and producing visual resonance, I argue, is an artful practice that has become politically vital in the age of the image-event.

If resonance is not mere repetition, neither is it equivalence. To draw out the resonance between the case of Papuans under Indonesian rule and the experience of Black people under white supremacy in the United States is to selectively and strategically foreground common features of two distinct and quite different historical formations. The forms of racial oppression and the respective political agendas of Black Lives Matter and Papuan Lives Matter are not the same. While Papuans have long identified as Black and with global anti-racist movements, as will be discussed below, Papuan resistance also takes form as an indigenous struggle for self-determination against a colonizing power. Indonesian rule in Papua is motivated by an extractive economy in which the Indonesian state enables, protects, and benefits from the presence of multinational mining corporations operating in this resource-rich region.¹¹ While dispossession and exploitation are features of this extractive economy, unlike the United States, in Papua there is no extensive history of chattel slavery and subsequent legally enshrined discrimination underlying contemporary forms of structural racism.

Among Indonesians, Papuans are considered racially other to the ethnic populations that make up the rest of Indonesia. The notion that the Indigenous inhabitants of Papua were "living in the stone age"—survivors of an earlier and more primitive stage of human evolution—took hold in the nineteenth century and continues to shape Indonesian attitudes toward Papuans.¹² A spatialized, evolutionary logic places Papuans—located at the far eastern end of the Indonesian archipelago—as more backward and less civilized than the majority Javanese and other ethnic groups in Indonesia.¹³

But despite this overtly racist discourse, majority Indonesian racism toward Papuans is so naturalized and commonplace as to be rarely acknowledged. The history of Indonesia as itself a country of Brown people colonized by a white European power—and the importance in its own self-imagining as a nation that arose from the struggle to overthrow the yoke of colonialism—has helped blind the majority Indonesian population to their own capacity for racism and colonial rule. Indeed, as I argue below, in drawing out the resonance of the images of Papuan abuse with the image of Floyd, activists worked to disabuse majority Indonesians of their own racial innocence.

The Image-Event and the Logic of Dissemination

The term *image-event* was first coined to describe staged spectacles designed explicitly to draw media attention and circulate as images, such as actions undertaken by environmentalist NGOs like Greenpeace or the Al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center.¹⁴ In *Demanding Images* I expand the scope of the term to include more spontaneous and opportunistic ways that images

become “political happenings.” I define the image-event as “a political process set in motion when a specific image or set of images erupts onto and intervenes in a social field, becoming a focal point of discursive and affective engagement across diverse publics.”¹⁵

More broadly, I propose that we might conceptualize all images as events in the sense of happenings that unfold in emergent ways across time and space. The event, writes Deleuze, is a vibration.¹⁶ Thinking along these lines, I draw attention to the reverberating dynamism of images, to the ways that they move, mutate, and resonate in unpredictable and sometimes combustible ways. In the process different elements of an image may take on new meanings, become newly salient, or be altered or transformed through active intervention. Conceptualizing images as events allows us to recognize them as always unfinished and open-ended. It moves us away from the singular image to an emphasis on the ways that images spawn and interact with other images. It also draws attention to the significance of acts of making, reworking, circulating, and scrutinizing images as increasingly important ways that ordinary people practice citizenship and enact political agency. While the eruption of image-events can be spontaneous and unanticipated, it is often the case that people cannily seize upon an unfolding image-event to mobilize, incite, and further the public visibility of competing political projects.

The Floyd case is a paradigmatic image-event.¹⁷ Floyd's killing might not have registered beyond a small and relatively disenfranchised community of witnesses and people connected directly to him, except that it was recorded by a bystander and that recording circulated via social media, creating an expanding affective public around the image. The force of the video of Floyd's murder rested not only in its status as credible evidence of brutality but also in its searing affectivity as Floyd's pain and suffering were viscerally conveyed, visually and sonically, in the moving image. Indeed it is partly because of the way that the image of Floyd resonated with other images of Black death and suffering that it carried such weight; the image did not stand alone but was only the most recent in a long and painful series. As it traveled, leaving anger and horror in its wake, it spawned iterations in various media from memes and political cartoons to handmade placards, murals, and posters. Distilling the video into a singular image, these iterations drew out the metaphoric power of Chauvin's knee on Floyd's neck, making a singular event stand for and resonate not only with other similar police murders of Black people but also with a whole history of racial violence and oppression. These circulating images stirred affect, moving a significant portion of people to take to the streets, where they then took and broadcast images of themselves and were pictured by the media.

This plethora of images swirling around in the wake of Floyd's death reverberated far beyond the borders of the United States. Epitomizing Ariella Azoulay's argument that the citizenry of photography extends beyond and transcends any state's sovereignty, making possible new kinds of claims and forms of political recognition, the Floyd image-event not only moved people in distant places to show solidarity with Blacks in America but also offered them an opportunity to call attention to their own conditions of systemic racism and racialized state violence.¹⁸ The Western media reported breathlessly on the many protests that occurred in sympathy with Floyd and Black Lives Matter in places like France, England, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Kenya, Israel, Brazil, and South Africa.

This reporting often portrayed the US-based protests as sparking, generating, or inspiring the protests that occurred in places like Papua and other parts of the Global South. Although the hashtag #PapuanLivesMatter had been in use for close to a year prior to the death of Floyd, a *Los Angeles Times* headline read, “George Floyd’s Death Inspires an Unlikely Movement in Indonesia: Papuan Lives Matter.”¹⁹ A Reuters piece was headlined “Black Lives Matter Rallies Papuan Activists in Indonesia.”²⁰ An article posted on [TheWire.com](https://www.thewire.com) bore the headline “How Black Lives Matter Inspired West Papua’s Freedom Struggle.”²¹ The Japan-based *Nikkei Asia* ran a story titled “George Floyd Protests Inspire Campaigns against Racism across Asia.”²² In some cases the actual articles offered solid reporting that acknowledged long-standing Papuan anti-racist activism. But the headlines replicated a logic of movement or diffusion from metropole to periphery. It is as if it took Floyd’s image to make people aware of, and spur them to action against, their own oppression. This colonialist logic figures protests in the Global South as imitatively triggered by the US-based protests. It fails to recognize how actors in the Global South strategically align their own long-standing struggles with those located at the center of global power structures. In what follows I briefly sketch the history of Papuan resistance to Indonesian occupation and alignment with Black liberation struggles before returning to this logic of dissemination and what it obscures.

West Papua, Indonesian Occupation, and Resistance

When Indonesia finally wrested independence from Dutch colonial rule in 1949 after a protracted conflict, the Dutch maintained control of their colonial territory on the island of Papua (then called Dutch New Guinea), which was perceived to be racially, ethnically, and culturally distinct from the regions that became Indonesia. Dutch rule in Papua was to be a kind of temporary guardianship until the people of Papua were deemed “mature” enough to govern themselves. The period between 1949 and 1963 saw ongoing tensions between the Indonesian Republic and the Netherlands over who rightfully should govern West Papua. Indonesian president Sukarno regarded Papua as an essential part of a multiethnic postcolonial nation whose boundaries would map onto the colonial state it had overthrown. The Dutch defended against this claim by appealing to the racial and cultural difference of Papuans from the populations of the rest of their former colony.²³ Finally in 1963 a negotiated agreement led to the transfer of the territory from Dutch to Indonesian stewardship with a promise to hold a referendum to determine the future of the territory. In 1969 a rigged referendum, perversely called the Act of Free Choice, led to formal incorporation of the resource-rich region into the nation-state of Indonesia.

Resistance to Indonesian rule emerged early. A pro-independence insurgency began in 1965 that has continued to this day under the banner of the Free West Papua Movement. In response to this armed resistance, Indonesia designated the area a military operation zone, operating an extremely repressive, military-led occupation of the territory from 1977 to 1998. Although the military operation formally ceased with the end of the dictatorship in 1998, there remains a significant and ongoing military presence, restriction on many freedoms (of expression, assembly, and so on), state-supported exploitation of resources, and a pattern of migration of non-Papuan Indonesians to the region that contributes to racial and ethnic tensions. Crackdowns on protest include the torture, imprisonment, and killing of pro-independence activists.

Military and police brutality toward Papuans, while mostly taking place in West Papua, has also occurred in other parts of Indonesia where Papuans have migrated for work and education. These episodes have particularly focused on Papuan students at higher education institutions who have organized demonstrations and other activities in support of Papuan independence. More routinely, Papuans traveling and living in Indonesia are exposed to racism and stigma as “backward” and “primitive.”

Yet the Indonesian government and most Indonesians do not recognize racism toward Papuans as a problem. The refusal among Indonesians to acknowledge both their own racism and contemporary Indonesian forms of colonialism, as noted above, is at least in part due to Indonesians' self-imagining as an anti-colonial nation made up of Brown people who, themselves victims of racism, overthrew European colonial rule. It is also a product of the framing of the conflict by the state as a purely political one in which a separatist insurgency threatens the integrity of the nation. This official framing is motivated by the state's interest in undermining Papuan activists' own appeals to racial difference as a rationale for self-determination and independence from Indonesia.

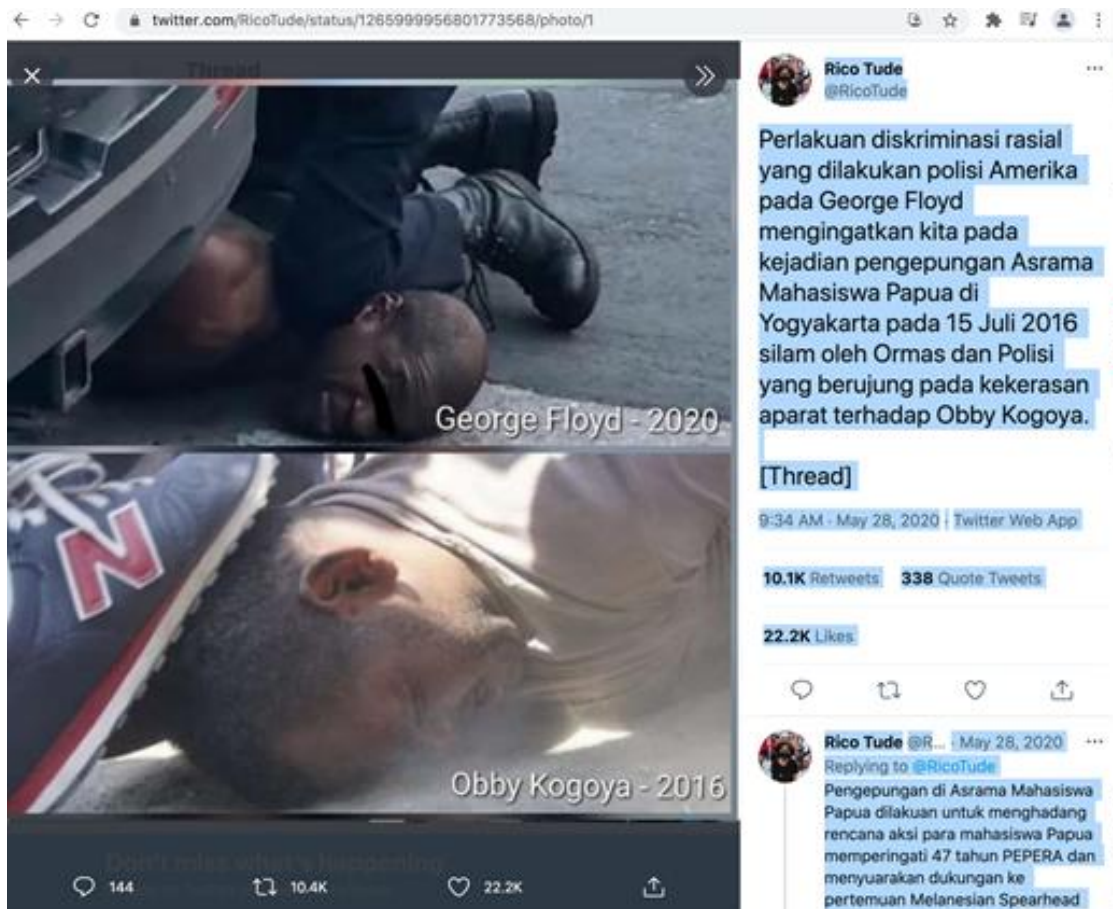
The headlines noted above suggested that Papuan Lives Matter was imitative of, and given impetus by, the protests in the United States in response to Floyd's murder. But, as Veronika Kusumaryati argues, “the emergence of Papuan Lives Matter is both a specific, local response to Black Lives Matter, and a continuation of West Papuan antiracism struggles.”²⁴ As early as the 1950s, in seeking international recognition of their right to self-determination, Papuans insisted that they were not naturally part of the Indonesian Republic because they were not of the same “Mongoloid” race as Indonesians.²⁵ Thus the same legacies of nineteenth-century scientific racism that shape contemporary forms of racial discrimination also provide a legitimization of Papuan independence claims. These racial claims also were the basis for seeking support from the outside world in Papuan struggles against colonial rule. In 1962 a pamphlet titled *The Voice of the Negroids of the Pacific to the Negroids throughout the World* appealed to a Black racial identity shared by Papuans and African peoples as an argument for why they should be ruled by neither the Dutch nor the Indonesians.²⁶ Kusumaryati describes how a decades-long history of Papuans aligning themselves with global Black movements for equality and justice shaped popular culture in Papua in the 1970s. As Kusumaryati details, Papuans expressed their Black identity via popular culture, through hair and dance styles and musical bands with names such as Black Brothers and Black Sweet. Attesting to communication between West Papuan activists and US-based civil rights leaders and organizations, she notes that in 1972 the NAACP formally protested Indonesia's annexation of Papua in a letter to the UN Secretary General. There was, in other words, nothing new in 2020 about Papuans identifying with and connecting to global black anti-racist movements, even if it came as an “unlikely” surprise to the *Los Angeles Times*.

The Art of Resonance

The image of Steven Yadohamang being subdued by Indonesian officers was not, in fact, the first image that activists selected and reframed in order to establish resonance between a Papuan victim of police violence and Floyd. In the summer of 2020, as protests responding to the murder of Floyd mushroomed around the world, an image of a Papuan man, Obby Kogoya, also began to

circulate, or rather recirculate, sometimes paired with the Floyd image and sometimes on its own, often with the hashtag #PapuanLivesMatter (fig. 4). The image showed Kogoya face down, his head pressed into the dirt by a sneakered foot. The original image had actually been taken several years earlier, in July 2016, when police raided a peaceful protest in support of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua by Papuan students in the Javanese city of Yogyakarta. Kogoya was beaten and later arrested and charged with resisting arrest and injuring a police officer. In addition to the physical brutality, a crowd of people had gathered, calling the protesting students “pigs” and “monkeys.”²⁷

Figure 4



Twitter post with juxtaposition of Floyd and Kogoya. The text reads, “Actions of racial discrimination by American police toward George Floyd remind us of the attack on the Papuan Students’ Dormitory in Yogyakarta on 15 July 2016 by mass organizations and police that ended with violence by the security forces toward Obby Kogoya.” Even as the images establish equivalence between Floyd and Kogoya, the dates placed on the images emphasize the anteriority of the violence against Kogoya. Posted by @RicoTude on May 28, 2020, 9:24 am. <https://twitter.com/RicoTude/status/1265999956801773568>.

Although the image of Obby Kogoya with a sneaker pressing his head into the ground had circulated in 2016, it was a different image of him from the same event that had initially picked up steam as an image-event. This image, in which Kogoya is being viciously dragged by the nostrils and his face is distorted in a grimace of pain, viscerally visualized the frequent complaint of Papuans that Indonesian authorities treated them inhumanely (fig. 5). One iteration of the

image, posted on a blog in August 2016, had text that read, “Insulted and treated like an animal, yet it is he who becomes a suspect.”²⁸

Figure 5



Twitter posts by journalist/activist Fahri Salam showing both the original image of Kogoya being pulled by the nostrils and an artist's rendering with the text “[Do You] Still Remember Obby Kogoya?” posted on March 17, 2017, 7:57 pm. <https://twitter.com/fahrisalam/status/842887645126516736>.

The issue of dehumanization was at the forefront of a major wave of protests that began in the summer of 2019 in response to a viral video of another attack on Papuan students, this time in the Javanese city of Surabaya. It was during these protests that the hashtag #PapuanLivesMatter began to be used, almost a year before the Floyd case. The attack on Papuan students, who had burned the Indonesian flag during a protest against the Indonesian occupation at their dormitory, was carried out first by vigilante militia groups and then by the police, who beat and taunted the students with the same epithets of “pig” and “monkey.” Viral videos of this event spurred sometimes violent protests by Papuans in West Papua and various Indonesian cities, followed by government crackdowns and arrests of activists.

As anthropologist Sophie Chao traces, the governing image of the 2019 protests was not the shoe to the head but the monkey ([fig. 6](#)).²⁹ In some cases protestors sought to reclaim their humanity, bearing signs reading “I am not a monkey.” In others they embraced the monkey as a sign of victimhood and radical difference from Indonesians. Memes featured monkeys holding flags that said “resist,” and protestors and activists wore monkey masks or wrote “monkey” across their chests. The image of the monkey drew attention to the lack of basic dignity and humanity accorded to them and reflected back to the Indonesian public their own racist gaze. Reclaiming the monkey as a “revolutionary symbol,” activist Victor Yeimo stated that “we are saying to them, ‘If you see us as animals, at least let us live in peace in the jungle and give us back our independence.’”³⁰ Tellingly, during the 2019 protests, the image from 2016 of Kogoya being grabbed by his nostrils resurfaced, now captioned with the words “Papuans Are Humans. Not Monkeys!” ([fig. 7](#)). In other words, an earlier image depicting brutality against Papuans was drawn from the existing archive of images and reframed to draw out its resonance with the visual theme of “humans, not monkeys.”

Figure 6



Protestor wearing a monkey mask with a poster reading “Stop Racism, Violence, and Discrimination.” From “Topeng Monyet di Aksi Kamisan,” CNN Indonesia, August 22, 2019. <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20190822170344-20-423851/topeng-monyet-di-aksi-kamisan-untuk-dukung-papua/>. Image credit: CNN Indonesia/Dhio Faiz.

Figure 7



Reworked image of Obby Kogoya as a protest poster, with the phrase “Papua are Humans. Not Monkeys!” illustrating an article in Wagadei, a West Papua-based online news agency. Wagadei Editor, “Orang Papua Monyet?” Wagadei, August 18, 2019. <https://wagadei.com/2019/08/18/orang-papua-monyet/>.

So too, in 2020, the photo of Kogoya's head being pressed into the ground was resuscitated and recirculated in recognition of its potential to resonate with the unfolding Floyd image-event. Kogoya became Indonesia's George Floyd. In one iteration of the image (fig. 8), the artist transformed the brand logo *N* on the sneaker to *NKRI*, the acronym for Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia or the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, an official name for the country, thereby ensuring that the image is read as a sign of state oppression. The image is framed with the words “Papuan Lives Matter” and “Black Lives Matter.” Another image (fig. 9) draws out resonance through juxtaposition of Floyd's image with Kogoya's (here the *N* on the sneaker has been rendered as a squiggle, presumably to draw attention away from the brand). Notably the dates placed on the image insist on the anteriority of the violence against Kogoya relative to Floyd, working against the colonial logic of belatedness.

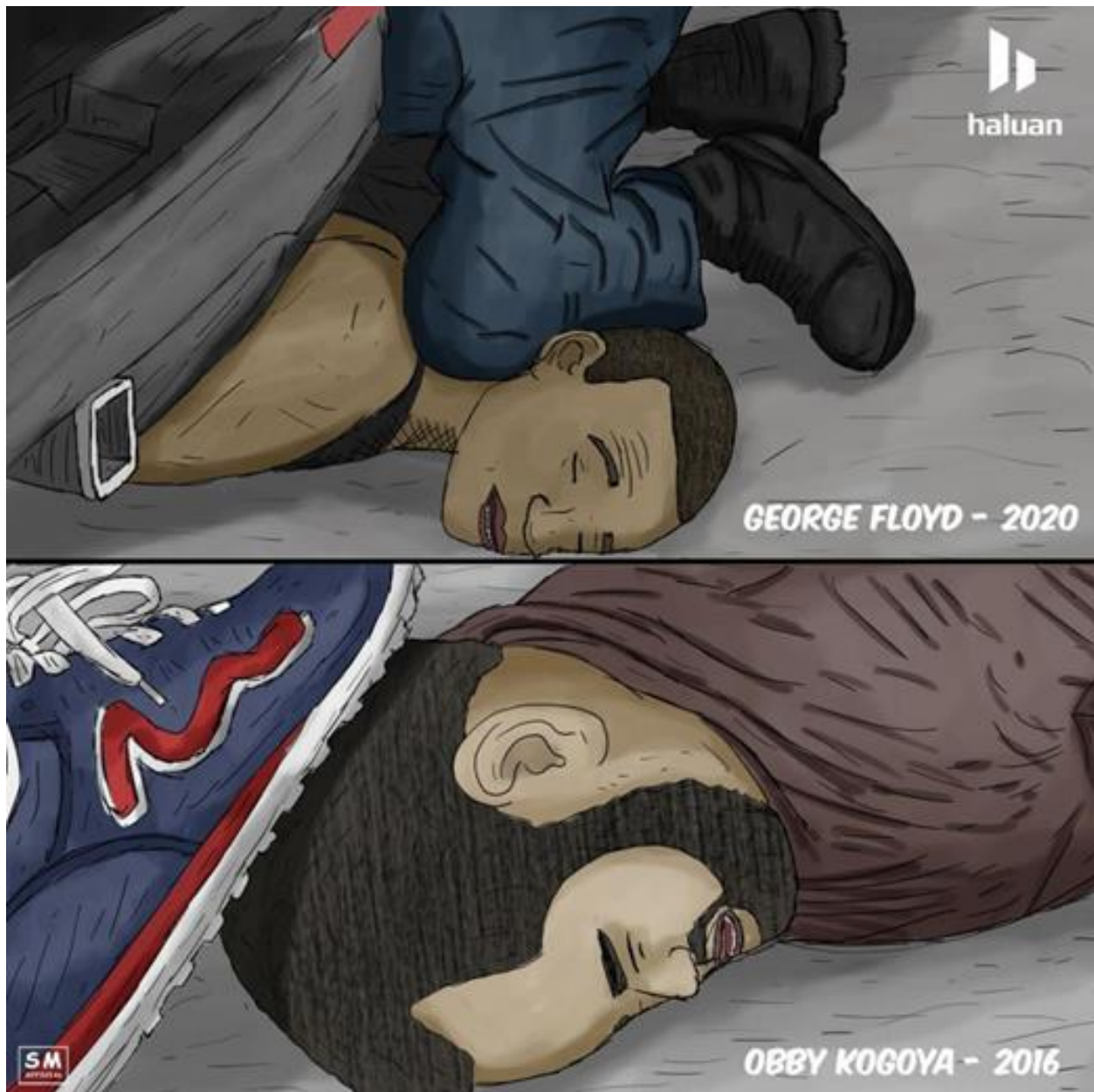
Figure 8



Papuan students protest in Surabaya, Indonesia, on June 16. JUNI KRISWANTO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Journalistic photograph of a protest in June 2020 showing a protestor holding a drawn image of Obby Kogoya with the shoe to his head, with the text “Papuan Lives Matter! Black Lives Matter!” Protest image from June 2020. Note that the N for New Balance has been reworked to read NKRI, or Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia (Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia). Photo credit: Juni Kriswanto/AFP/Getty Images. The photo appears as an illustration of Krithika Varagur, “Black Lives Matter in Papua, Too.” Foreign Policy, June 16, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/16/black-lives-matter-papua-Indonesia/>.

Figure 9



Drawing juxtaposing Kogoya and Floyd. Note that the logo N has been transformed into a squiggle, presumably to draw attention away from the brand. Again, the dates placed on the image emphasize the anteriority of the violence against Kogoya. This image was posted on Twitter by Andreas Harsono of Human Rights Watch Indonesia. June 5, 2020, 12:16 am. <https://twitter.com/andreasharsono/status/1268758464840396800/photo/1>.

This resonance not only worked to amplify Papuan anti-racist struggles by drawing global attention to similarities between Papua and the United States. Perhaps more important, according to activists, the analogy effectively drawn with the far better recognized and readily condemned racism against American Blacks—a resonance made palpable by visual means—caused Indonesians to begin to acknowledge their own racism. As the Papuan activist and academic

Elvira Rumkabu stated in an article in *Foreign Policy*, “In Papua, we have a lot of names like George Floyd.” She continued, “Papuan share the anger of black Americans . . . and we are demanding now that people around the world, but especially Indonesians, realize we have the same suffering here.”³¹ Seeing themselves, in effect, by way of George Floyd has brought about an uncomfortable and eye-opening reckoning for many Indonesians.

Conclusion: Riding the Wave

The conventional media narrative about #PapuanLivesMatter perpetuates a colonial logic of belatedness whereby political agency originates in the Euro-American metropole: #PapuanLivesMatter is (simply) inspired by and imitative of #BlackLivesMatter. A closer look at the Obby Kogoya and Steven Yadohamang image-events reveals practices of strategic alignment and less unidirectional patterns of convergence. To challenge diffusionist center-to-periphery narratives does not mean ignoring the profound political-economic asymmetries that render the scale and intensity of US-based image-events greater than those originating elsewhere. But logics of emanation out from a center cannot capture the lateral, recursive, contingent, and convergent unfolding of image-events.

Nor can they do justice to the agency of those who, exquisitely aware of these asymmetries, strategically practice the art of resonance. In today's densely networked, image-saturated media ecologies, image-events are increasingly central to political process. “Image brokers,” to borrow Zeynep Gürsel's term, have therefore become critical if often unrecognized political actors who capitalize on the unfinished quality of images and their capacities for iconic resonance.³² Past images stand ready to be plucked from the archive and reanimated in the present, while the constant feed of new images must be monitored vigilantly for potential use. Narratives of imitation and viral spread obscure the labor and agency involved in both the reactivation of Obby Kogoya's image in 2020 and the selection and framing of the still of Steven Yadohamang in 2021 (fig. 10). Media savvy and visual skills enabled Papuan activists to catch the wave of an already potent global image-event, to harness its momentum, and to reframe their struggle. In producing “Indonesia's George Floyd,” Papuan activists made resonance happen, thereby amplifying their demands.

Figure 10



Facebook post on Benny Wenda's public page (https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10159947839488484&id=153680463483). Wenda is interim president of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua Provisional Government (in exile).

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Notes

1. *West Papua* is the self-identifying term used by indigenous Papuans to refer to what are now officially two Indonesian provinces, Papua and West Papua.

2. On the importance of *memoria passionis* in Papuan Christian theology, see [Farhadian, "Emerging Theology on an Asian Frontier."](#) My thanks to Veronika Kusumaryati, who pointed me to this source and pressed me to develop the point made in this paragraph.
3. [Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255.](#)
4. [Tarde, *Laws of Imitation*, 4n1.](#) For a discussion of Tarde's theory of imitation, see [Mazzarella, "Myth of the Multitude," 772–73.](#)
5. See [Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*](#); [Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*](#); [Ghosh, *Global Icons*.](#)
6. [Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 37.](#)
7. [Ghosh, *Global Icons*, 1.](#)
8. [Strassler, "Seeing the Unseen in Indonesia's Public Sphere," 128.](#)
9. [Larkin, "Making Equivalence Happen."](#)
10. [Larkin, "Making Equivalence Happen," 240–41.](#)
11. The most significant of these is Freeport McMoRan, which has operated the world's largest gold and copper mine, located in West Papua, since 1967. The Indonesian military provides security for the multinational corporation, which is Indonesia's largest taxpayer. For a recent discussion, see [Kusumaryati, "Freeport and the States."](#)
12. See [Rutherford, *Living in the Stone Age*.](#) While Indonesia is made up of islands populated by hundreds of ethnic groups (distinguished by language and by cultural-religious practices and beliefs) and in official discourses Papuans are identified as another "suku" or ethnicity equivalent to other ethnic groups in a multiethnic nation, in everyday discourses and imaginaries Papuans are considered racially distinct from other Indonesian ethnic groups. This racialization is based in phenotypical characteristics (darker skin, facial features, frizzy hair) and the durability of a nineteenth-century racial-cartographic imaginary. According to the so-called Wallace Line (proposed by the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace in the 1860s), West Papua lies on one side a geographical demarcation that separates the Malay race from Papuan racial groups. On the difficulties of scientifically establishing this line and its political afterlife, see [Sysling, "Human Wallace Line."](#)
13. The largest and most politically dominant ethnic group in Indonesia are the Javanese (40–45 percent of the population). Under government "transmigration" programs (a formal policy begun during Dutch colonial times and continued under Indonesian rule to relieve pressure on resources in densely populated areas and facilitate development in sparsely populated regions) and more spontaneous forms of migration, hundreds of thousands of (mostly Javanese) Indonesians have settled in Papua, leading to deep ethnic, religious, economic, and political tensions. In Indonesian spatialized racial-cultural discourses, populations from the eastern parts of Indonesia are often described as *kasar* (coarse, rough, uncivilized) in contrast to more *halus* (refined) groups, such as the Javanese. Residing in the easternmost region of Indonesia, Papuans are considered the most *kasar* both in appearance and in comportment. (Some ethnic groups in the eastern part of the island chain occupy a racially ambiguous status; although not as clearly "other" as Papuans, they are still treated as less civilized than ethnic groups to their west.) On the racism experienced by Papuan students in Indonesian institutions of higher learning, see [Munro, *Dreams Made Small*.](#)
14. [Delicath and DeLuca, "Image Events."](#)
15. [Strassler, *Demanding Images*, 9–10.](#)

16. [Deleuze, *Fold*, 1.](#)
17. While a fuller discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, the importance of image-events to racial justice campaigns in the United States cannot be overestimated. One thinks here not only of recent police killings caught on camera (such as the murders of Eric Garner and Philando Castile) but also, further back, of the decision of Emmett Till's mother to allow images of his profoundly disfigured, lynched body to circulate in *Jet* magazine in 1955 or, even earlier, of Ida B. Wells's recasting of celebratory lynching photographs taken by perpetrators into anti-lynching documents that critically reflected on the spectacle of Black death (on the latter see [Raiford, "Lynching, Visuality and the Un/Making of Blackness"](#)). On W. E. B. Du Bois's publishing of lynching images in NAACP publications, see [Balthasar, "Racial Violence in Black and White."](#) These kinds of images can be read as a "radical recuperation of the dead black body" in the service of Black struggles for justice and for life. [Baker, *Humane Insight*, 81.](#)
18. [Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*](#). Azoulay's notion of "the event of photography" bears some relation—but is also distinct—from my use of the term *image-event*. For Azoulay the event of photography refers to encounters between people, between people and the camera, and between people and the photographic image that are set in motion by photography, enabling new forms of political recognition. The mere potential presence of the camera or possible existence of an image can constitute an event of photography. The idea of the image-event shares Azoulay's emphasis on contingency and open-endedness, on practice and on processes, and on the idea that any image always exceeds the intentions of its maker, its subjects, or its viewers. In charting the trajectories of image-events, my emphasis is on the paths and proliferations of actual images (which may or may not be photographs) as they precipitate discourse and affective response, thereby participating in and giving shape to political imaginings.
19. [Pierson, "George Floyd's Death Inspires an Unlikely Movement."](#)
20. [Lamb, "Black Lives Matter Rallies Papuan Activists."](#)
21. [Firdaus, "How Black Lives Matter Inspired West Papua's Freedom Struggle."](#) The article was originally posted on July 8, 2020, with the same headline, by *Jacobin Magazine* (<https://jacobinmag.com/2020/07/west-papua-black-lives-matter>).
22. [Maulia, "George Floyd Protests Inspire Campaigns."](#)
23. See [Sysling, "Human Wallace Line," 327–28](#). Although Sukarno favored inclusion of West Papua within the new nation, Mohammad Hatta, another founding father and Indonesia's first vice president, had argued against it in 1945 on the basis of Papuans' supposed backwardness and cultural difference.
24. [Kusumaryati, "#Papuanlivesmatter," 470.](#)
25. [Sysling, "Human Wallace Line," 328.](#)
26. [Kaisiepo and Jouwe, *Voice of the Negroids of the Pacific*](#), cited in [Sysling, "Human Wallace Line," 328.](#)
27. ["Papuan Student Faces Six-Month Imprisonment Charge."](#) The epithet *pig*, a pejorative term in the context of Indonesia's majority Muslim population, refers to the importance of pigs in Papuan society and culture; the term *monkey* is a more explicitly racialized term indicating the alleged primitivity of Papuans. Ironically, monkeys are not indigenous to Papua.
28. "Dihina dan diperlakukan seperti binatang malah dijadikan tersangka." [Heger, "Tiga Kejanggalan."](#)

29. [Chao, “We Are \(Not\) Monkeys.”](#)
30. Victor Yeimo, spokesperson for the National Committee for West Papua, quoted in [Mas, “Papua Turn Monkey Slur into a Revolutionary Symbol.”](#)
31. [Varagur, “Black Lives Matter in Indonesia, Too.”](#)
32. [Gürsel, *Image Brokers*.](#)

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