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Demanding images: Democracy, mediation, and the image-event in Indonesia by Karen Strassler

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DEMANDING IMAGES: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia. By *Karen Strassler*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020. xiv, 329 pp. (Illustrations, B&W photos, coloured photos.) US\$29.95, paper. ISBN 978-1-4780-0469-1.

Karen Strassler takes the reader on a roller-coaster ride through Indonesia's turbulent democratic developments of recent years—including stages of disappointment, fear, and tragedy, but also periods of joy, hilarity, and hope. To set the scene, the book opens with a photo-essay montage of full-colour images. Fake money stickers, screenshots from celebrity sex scandals, urban graffiti, political rally selfies, photographs taken at protests, and posters of a slain activist reflect the variety of images in circulation in the years following Indonesia's democratic transition in 1998. To understand the production and reception of these images Strassler introduces the concept of an "image-event"—"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" (9–10). With a more open political system and advances in media technologies, Strassler argues that Indonesians have increasingly engaged with politics through images. In turn, the affective and evidentiary force of images has reshaped politics. Through an in-depth study of various image-events, Strassler concludes that despite the initial euphoria over Indonesia's democratic transition, by 2014 "a transparent and open public sphere, under conditions of Indonesia's capitalist media landscape and entrenched structures of inequality and corruption, could not deliver on the promise of democracy" (243).

Each of the book's seven chapters begins with a key incident that set in motion an image-event, which in turn is tracked throughout the chapter in text and visuals. Each image-event is situated historically within post-independence Indonesia, and supportive insights are drawn from a wide array of scholarly works.

The introductory chapter begins with the emergence in 2013 of nostalgic images of Indonesia's former authoritarian leader, Suharto. These images were quickly countered by iconic images of Munir Said Thalib, an Indonesian human rights activist murdered in 2003. After a discussion of the debates these compelling images triggered, the chapter introduces key concepts of image-events, public visibility, media ecologies, and the author's ethnographic approach.

The six subsequent chapters are loosely chronological. The first two concern the time period immediately around the democratic transition. One focuses on the 50,000-rupiah bill, which had Suharto's face on it, and how it was modified, circulated, and used by artists and activists to highlight corruption under the authoritarian regime. The next chapter deals with the controversy surrounding the rape of Chinese women during riots in 1998.

Strassler argues that because the victims refused to come forward due to fears of stigmatization and state retaliation, the debate was shaped by the absence of images of public testimony or of the crimes themselves.

The next two chapters consider two 2008 laws that placed restrictions on individual freedoms—specifically, regulating the Internet and criminalizing pornography. In the former, Strassler explores how images and videos of sex scandals are dissected and authenticated by self-professed experts such as Roy Suryo, as well as by the media and the general public. In a new era of democracy, this process reveals a public obsessed with secrets and anxious for truths. The other chapter focuses on a little-known artwork, Pinkswing Park, which featured images of a partially naked male soap opera star. It became a public spectacle after hardline Islamists condemned it as pornographic and offensive to Islam, thus pitting themselves against progressives.

The final two chapters cover the years 2013 to 2014. The first examines public image-events from the streets of Yogyakarta in 2013, which raise the question of whether that city's explosion of street murals, graffiti, and advertising was symptomatic of a healthy democracy or a situation spiraling out of control. The concluding chapter studies political participation and volunteerism by analyzing images of presidential candidate Joko Widodo's supporters, as well as the crowdsourcing efforts undertaken to ensure that all votes in the 2014 presidential election were counted fairly.

Understanding Indonesian politics through image-events is a novel and insightful approach to interpreting political debates in the public sphere. The wealth of detail contained in the book clearly demonstrates that since democratization, Indonesian politics "has become a politics of turbulent image-events rather than staged and static appearances" (11) that were typical of the previous authoritarian era. Strassler's description of images as "evidentiary" (ones that provide authoritative proof or truth) versus "ludic" (images that are playfully reworked, such as parody) effectively captures differences in the goals and interpretation of images across a number of chapters. Her conceptualization should be very useful to other scholars.

Another strength of the book is Strassler's ability to shed new light on lesser-known issues. She has studied Indonesia in depth through repeated visits over the last two decades, including extensive ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with local activists, artists, photographers, and reporters, in addition to the rich array of traditional and digital media sources that she has accumulated over the years.

Strassler also draws on an impressive range of scholarly works from anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, literary criticism, media studies, and the visual arts. However, since her core question is how Indonesia has lived up to the promise of democracy, her degree of engagement with political science seems somewhat thin. Indeed, the term "democracy" and its meaning in Indonesia could have been discussed more fully, as it is left largely open to interpretation. In addition, some issues relating to the promise of

democracy, such as the explosive separatist and communal conflicts in the peripheries, sweeping electoral reforms and the subsequent legislative and regional head elections, extensive decentralization, and a turn to populism, are not addressed.

These quibbles aside, *Demanding Images* is a fascinating, entertaining, and insightful read. A one-of-a-kind book on Indonesia, it will appeal to those interested in Indonesian media, politics, and society, as well as those who want to understand how images affect politics in our more complex media environment.

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THIS IS WHAT INEQUALITY LOOKS LIKE. *By Teo You Yenn. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2019. 312 pp. (B&W photos.) US\$19.00, paper. ISBN 978-981-14-0595-2.*

Teo You Yenn's *This is What Inequality Looks Like* (TIWILL) is arguably the most pivotal book ever written on Singapore's inequality. Quoted in parliament, selling 30,000 copies within three years, and sparking extended national debates over the next few years, TIWILL breathed new life and insight into discussions of inequality in Singapore.

Clearly written and thoughtfully constructed, TIWILL's portrayal of poverty, perpetuated by inequality, effortlessly resonates beyond academic audiences without losing theoretical richness. Vivifying Singapore's poor in the public imagination with heartfelt depictions of their daily lives, TIWILL elicits empathy while provoking awareness of how Singaporeans themselves might perpetuate the structures that trap the impoverished.

Leveraging ethnographic insights from visits to Singapore's rental public housing neighborhoods from 2013 to 2016, Teo juxtaposes families' everyday experiences against prevailing narratives of meritocracy and economic survival. These narratives obscure and justify the plight of these families, Teo argues, culminating in a policy system focused on self-reliance through employment and traditional family structures. The result is "differentiated deservingness," an idea Teo introduces to depict how Singaporeans have "different types of access and degree of public support depending on who they are and how they live" (173). In other words, one's income heavily influences access to quality public goods and services like healthcare or housing.

Arguing against a "script" of "normal" behavior that renders the choices of lower-income families as "bad" (36–37), TIWILL illustrates how material poverty significantly constrains the options of the impoverished; how it reduces their agency, and snowballs disadvantage for their children even as parents from these households struggle to provide them the same